University of Alberta

# Ecological Identity

by

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# Abstract

This hermeneutic study explores two questions: "What does it mean to have an ecological identity?" and "What implication does this have for social work practice?" It initially explains how these questions surfaced for the researcher in his role as a social work educator and then portrays human identity as an identity in crisis. Readers are invited to consider the possibilities inherent in an ecological identity. Why a hermeneutic approach would best meet the research goals is explained to engage in a comprehensive and flexible exploration of these research questions. An historical account of philosophical hermeneutics is provided, followed by a brief discussion of the primary tenets associated with practical hermeneutics. Particular attention is given to the important role of conversation, questions, and interpretive writing in demonstrating how the researcher came to understand the topic.

A detailed process recording of each of the two conversations with three social work practitioners is given, including personal reflections, which is followed by an initial attempt to conceptualize the meaning associated with an ecological identity. Detailed transcripts of these conversations invite the reader to join in the interpretative process. The interpretive analysis of these conversations revealed that ecological identity arises from direct embodied experiences in nature, which in turn challenges the notion of self and raises questions about humans' relationship with the world around them. This interpretive analysis also highlights the important role of language in any attempt to claim an ecological identity. To promote further conversation, tentative "answers" are offered to several questions that surface as a result of the first conversations with the research participants.

The final portion of this research is an interpretive analysis of the second conversations with the research participants on social work practice. A number of questions challenge traditional social work concepts such as the social work relationship, the root causes of human suffering, and the concept of social justice. A brief account follows of what can be described as a wider and deeper ecological social work practice. This dissertation concludes with an exploration of ecopedagogy and its potential impact on the role of a social work educator.

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# CHAPTER 1:

# INTRODUCTION

## The View From Here

This past summer my children and I visited the Edmonton Space Odyssium. While we were walking through the various galleries, I found the exhibit related to space travel very interesting. This particular exhibit had a cross section of the space shuttle Columbia through which visitors could walk. One of the information plates attached to the mock space shuttle described how the shuttle had been constructed in a way that ensured that each astronaut could sit by a window. Being able to look out a window and see planet earth apparently helped the astronauts cope with the feelings of isolation and loneliness that often accompany space travel. As the information plate described, seeing the white, blue, and green swirls of earth helped to reassure the shuttle passengers by offering the tangible image of "home."

In further reading, I learned that this view of earth did much more than provide reassurance to the astronauts; it had a deep emotional, psychological, and spiritual impact upon them as well. Many of the astronauts who viewed earth from the vantage point of outer space described it as a life-altering experience. They began to understand that they are part of an earth community comprised of both human and nonhuman life forms and, in a more concrete way, that the earth is our home and that humans have to live accordingly. After his voyage into space, Canadian astronaut Marc Garneau made a commitment to encourage Canadians to think and act in more sustainable ways (Boyd, 2004). Immediately after her space shuttle trip, Canadian astronaut Roberta Bondar passionately argued that Canada's natural resources may well be "the salvation of the whole planet" (p. vii). The experience of flying in the space shuttle Columbia and seeing the earth as "home" also inspired both astronauts to become involved in a number of important social change efforts.

While contemplating this information about the astronauts, I realized that I have had a similar experience of understanding earth as "home." Although I have never flown in a space shuttle, I had a similar experience on the shore of a remote lake in northern Ontario. I remember sitting quietly on the granite slaps beside the lake and being overtaken by both the beauty and the silence that surrounded me. The sun was setting in the west, and the sky had a slight tinge of purple and pink rippling through it. The water was profoundly calm, and in the distance I could hear the beckoning call of a loon. Initially, I had the feeling that the lake, sky, and forest [illegible] coming towards me, and I soon found myself totally engulfed by my surroundings. [illegible] sat quietly, the boundary between my "self" and my surroundings became more [illegible]. I began to realize that I was part of something much larger than myself. I was part of something that could be described as "home." Similarly to the astronauts, I was inspired by this experience, and it was soon afterwards that I decided to become a social worker.

Tomashow (1995) would describe my experience on the side of the lake as the origins of an ecological identity. He described ecological identity as follows:

> Ecological identity refers to all the different ways people construe themselves in relations to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self. Nature becomes an object of identification. For the individual, this has extraordinary conceptual ramifications. The interpretation of life experience transcends social and cultural interactions. It also includes a person's connection to the earth, perception of the ecosystem, and direct experience of nature. (p. 3)

Implicit in Tomashow's definition is the notion that humans can learn a great deal about themselves through their experience in nature. Clayton and Opotow (2003) supported this assumption: "Environmental identity [they saw this as synonymous with ecological identity] emerges through immediate and personal experiences with the natural world and challenges people's understanding of the way they see themselves and nature" (p. 14). Tomashow's definition also suggests that the formation of an ecological identity can have an impact on the choices that people make in their day-to-day lives. Holland and Kempton (2003) believed that ecological identity is directly linked to behavior and suggested that our identity as ecological beings has a dialectical relationship with the actions in which we engage. The more salient our ecological identity becomes, the more likely that we will engage in ecological sustaining behavior; and the more we take part in ecologically sustaining behavior, the more our ecological identity is enhanced.

In retrospect, my ecological identity has been nurtured and sustained since I was a young boy. Since a very early age I have loved being in the outdoors, and, as time progressed, my relationship with the "more than human world" (Abram, 1996, p.15) became an important source of meaning. As a young man I worked as a wilderness counselor with troubled teens, and later in my professional life I ran therapeutic wilderness hikes for adults. Now, as a husband and father of two children, I take our family on retreats to the wilderness on a regular basis. All of these experiences have helped me to better understand my place in the world and have guided my actions in both my personal and my professional life.

In a general sense my experience beside the lake was similar to the experience of the astronauts in outer space. Although our vantage points were different, we engaged in a similar process. We were touched and inspired by experiencing the green, blue, and white planet as our home. We were also motivated to act in a way that was congruent with this experience. Perhaps what might be different is how we chose to integrate this learning. As a social worker, I am concerned not only with the degradation of the natural environment, but also with human suffering and social injustice. There is strong evidence that human suffering and social injustice are deeply linked to the destruction of the biosphere (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 1998, p. 4). It is also suggests that the cause of both our environmental and our social woes is a human identity that fails to encompass our relationship with the natural world. In this regard it seems important to study the concept of ecological identity. From my view, sitting at the edge of the lake, experiencing nature, is an excellent place from which to begin.

## Social Work and Ecology

My love for nature and interest in the human-nature relationship has "flowed" into my work as a social work educator as well. Since the late 1970s social work theory has been based upon ecological-systems thinking (Germaine, 1978; Germaine & Gitterman, 1980). This approach encourages us to see social problems that do not simply stem from individual pathology, but also are a result of a complex set of relationships between the individual and his or her social environment. This perspective shifts the tendency to focus our helping efforts on the individual "outward" onto the complex interaction between the individual and his or her social, political, and economic environments. It also challenges us to view social problems as complex phenomena rather than simplifying things by "blaming the victim" (Ryan, 1971, p. xiv ).

Social work educators have found that helping students to develop an ecological perspective is a difficult task (Besthorn & Tegtmeier, 1999; Ungar, 2002). It is difficult for students to understand the reciprocal relationship between themselves and the larger political, economic, and cultural structures; my experience in teaching social work over the past 15 years supports this statement. Generally, students find grasping this perspective challenging and struggle to integrate it into their practice. It is also hard to understand an ecological view of the world if one has not identified oneself as an ecological being (Tomashow, 1995). Clayton and Opotow (2003) described this clearly:

> To give a twist to a phrase from the women's movement, an environmental identity is what we need in order to recognize that the personal is political and vice versa: immediate local actions can have a global consequences, and that remote environmental threats are personally significant. (p. 61)

Smith (1999b) argued that a study of human identity is essential to a study of action because any form of action implies a theory of identity. He explained that how we relate to others and how we decide to engage with them "depends on who I think the Other is, and who I think I am in relation to them" (p. 11). Aron and McLauglin-Wolpe (2001) suggested that developing an ecological identity involves a process of *self-expansion*, which is a motivation that is fundamental to humans and can achieved through redefining the self in a way that includes others. Macy (1989) maintained that this expansion of self that accompanies an ecological identity involves a "humbling but also gratifying shift to a more expansive, accommodating and joyous identity" (p. 202) and serves as a "ground for effective engagement with the forces and pathologies that imperil us" (p. 203).

There is also growing evidence to suggest that individuals who encompass an ecological identity develop the capacity to solve problems in a unique and ecological way (Fox, 1990; Sewall, 1995; Tomashow, 1995). Clayton and Opotow (2003) described research that demonstrated a clear link between individuals who possess an ecological identity and the types of decisions that they make in both their personal and professional lives. Apparently the choices that these individuals make are underpinned by values related to fairness, justice, collectivity, and creativity. Clayton's research suggested that our experiences in nature enhance our ecological identity and lead to particular values, attitudes, and behaviors that are congruent with the value base that underpins social work practice.

Bretherton (2003) argued that an attempt to determine the role of ecological identity in our lives is both a political and a psychological process. It is political because it involves determining who is included or valued and who is not. On the other hand, discourse on ecological identity becomes a psychological endeavor when it challenges us to change our values and beliefs. The notion of inclusion becomes central in any attempt to understand what it means to have an ecological identity because it entails a process of "widening" our sense of ourselves through embracing and encompassing the natural world (Fox, 1990). This is no easy task because it goes against a long-held Western tradition that considers humans autonomous and separate from their surroundings (Capra, 1995). Hillman (1993) believed that overcoming this artificial separation and placing the human subject back into the world is the most important task that humanity faces today.

Fisher (2002) argued that when we eliminate the human-nature schism, we are given the opportunity to see the world and our place in it in a different light. This reflects an ontological shift that moves us from a place of isolation and alienation to one of relationship and community. From this ontological stance our interest in and care for others also take on a different meaning. We begin to understand our behavior and actions in a larger context. In Fisher's view, each and every decision that we make and behavior in which we engage becomes a "service of life." He challenged us to understand that how we treat each other and how we treat nature must come from the same ontological base and suggested that we are facing not only an ecological crisis, but also, in fact, a social-ecological crisis (p. 21).

## Purpose and Imagination

When I began my social work education I was excited about learning more about ecological-systems theory and its implications for practice. When I entered university I had just spent the previous summer working in the outdoors with youth and spent many days paddling on isolated lakes and walking on wilderness trails trying to make sense of the immense beauty and mystery that surrounded me. It seemed very congruent to study ecological theory. As my social work education progressed, I continually tried to reconcile my experience in nature with the theory and practice of social work. Studying ecological identity is a continuation of this process. Because my own experience seemed to echo the sentiments in the preceding section, I believed that an in-depth study of the concept of ecological identity would be a fruitful endeavor. In this regard in this research I explored the questions, “What does it mean to have an ecological identity, and what implications does this have for helping others?”

Holland (2004, p. 72) argued that imagination is an important component of any study of identity. To study identity effectively, he suggested that our imaginations must possess a keen sense of history and be filled with hope. In a similar manner educator and researcher Maxine Greene (1975) argued that a research endeavor must encompass an imagination that will allow people to “move within their own subjectivity and break with the common sense world he normally takes for granted” (p. 302). Greene added that researchers themselves must allow for the possibility that the horizons of daily live are alterable. Riley-Taylor (2002) described having an imagination as discovering the possible within the actual. She clearly articulated the "promise" of imagination for the research endeavor. In her opinion, imagination "acknowledges the constant generativity of further understandings, of negotiating passages across chasms of contrast and difference, of bridging incommensurable vocabularies in search of new languages, new ways of communicating, and the means toward further dialogue" (p. 61).

I bring a hermeneutic imagination (Smith, 1999b) to this study. A hermeneutic imagination views the natural world as if it has a particular subjectivity with the potential to make a "claim" upon me that comes to me through my experience in nature and is articulated through language. A hermeneutic imagination portrays language as encompassing a history, saturated with political interest, and filled with cultural bias. As a result, language reveals more about the time and place in which we live than any final determination of "truth." In this regard, a hermeneutic imagination pays special attention to language and the etymological roots that point to particular historic and cultural traditions that influence my meaning-making efforts.

In many ways the hermeneutic imagination challenges me to bring a particular "deviance" to this study, one that challenges any notion that a predetermined and representational truth about my relationship to nature can ever be fully revealed. In addition, if the language that I used to describe my relationship to nature was determined to be essentially interpretable, it would have thwarted any notions of conducting this research objectively. If I am using language that is deeply influenced by both history and the cultural tradition in which I live, my subjectivity is always implicated. I cannot transport or transcend myself out of this study to a place of unconnected objectivity. This brings with it the responsibility to deconstruct what is given and continually ask the question, "What does it mean?"

Inherent in the hermeneutic imagination is an acknowledgement that the human endeavor of "coming to understanding" is a dynamic process that never stops with a definitive "once and for all" representation of reality. In this regard questioning becomes more important than finding answers, and as my topic continued to stay alive (open to new meaning), it influenced the direction and approach that I took to conducting my research. It is important to note, however, that within a hermeneutic imagination lies a particular accountability. My writing had to be written in a way that would make a claim upon my readers and invite them to keep the conversation related to ecological identity going. It also implies that this research endeavor was in large part a creative effort that challenged me to link any meaning that emerged with not only my personal experience, but also the cultural and linguistic context of our times.

Implicit within the hermeneutic imagination is the belief that as a researcher I have brought my own prejudices and biases to this research effort. I have been interested in my research topic for many years now and have had a number of experiences that have helped me to understand ecological identity and its implication for helping others in a particular way. Unlike other research approaches, however, the hermeneutic imagination emphasizes that these prejudices were essential in helping me to understand my topic. I saw the prejudices that I brought to this research effort as forestructures (preconceptions) to understanding. It is these forestructures that have brought a particular "horizon" to my understanding. To expand these horizons (move to deeper understanding), I had to be willing to risk their being changed, which suggests that the various forms of text (written, voice, or otherwise) that I encountered in my research had the potential to change the way that I thought and felt about my research topic. In this regard my research or "coming to understanding" effort was a highly dialectical process. As I learned more about my research topic, it changed the way that I thought about it. This, in turn, led to new questions and new ways of approaching my topic. Fisher (2002) succinctly stated:

> If we wish to uncover new realties we must therefore be willing to become new people . . . . This is accomplished only as we reveal and risk our own prejudices, and dialectically bend ourselves toward the phenomenon's own governing demands. Let it grasp us as much as we grasp it—*serve* it, in a sense. (p. 41)

## Process and Format

Engaging in a research process that is guided by a hermeneutic imagination requires a number of important features. Because questioning is central to the research process, Boostrom (1994, p. 51) argued that researchers should know a great deal about their research topic before any formal data collection begins. In relation to this study, Boostrom's comments suggested that if I were conversant with the literature related to my topic and had talked to others who have knowledge and experience related to the topic, I would be more adept at asking questions. I would also be more sensitive and more able to respond to particular surprises, contradictions, or linguistic nuances that come my way. The challenge, however, is not to confirm or validate my understanding, but to use it as a resource to uncover the persistent "hidden question" (Carson, 1986, p. 75) that lies behind any attempt to solve a problem.

A study guided by a hermeneutic imagination must also include a clear description of how the process of coming to understand is a highly relational activity. Meaning emerges between two people when their particular horizons of understanding meet and change the way that they each think about a particular topic. Not only is the meaning making endeavor highly relational, but it also takes place within a cultural and linguistic context that influences the way that people describe their experience. In this regard I was challenged to clearly articulate this process and engage in interpretive writing that is consistent with this understanding.

Although the hermeneutic imagination is skeptical of the concept of definitive truth, it did call on me to demonstrate how my new learning related to ecological identity can be applied to social work practice. Thus application is an important feature of the hermeneutic imagination:

> The idea of application is central to hermeneutics in that it is an integral and necessary part of the interpretive process. To understand means that what is understood has a claim on us, we appropriate the meaning to our own thoughts and actions in some way. (Carson, 1986, p. 82)

Because the research endeavor made a claim upon me, I was also compelled to articulate how my attempts to learn more about my research question had changed me.

To facilitate a deeper understanding of my research question "What does it mean to have an ecological identity, and what implication does this have for helping others?" I engaged in conversations with social workers who have demonstrated an interest in trying to integrate their experiences and understanding related to ecological identity into their social work practice. Following my conversations with these social workers, I became involved in an interpretive effort that would eventually lead to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of my research topic. I then applied my new understandings of ecological identity to the practice of social work. Finally, I have provided a personal accounting of how this study has impacted me.

To meet the purpose of this study and to provide a clear process, I have divided my writing into six chapters. The remainder of Chapter 1 describes the social and cultural context in which this study of identity took place. The etymological origins of the words *identity* and *ecology* are also explored to facilitate an understanding of the concept of ecological identity. I then identify some of the challenges related to exploring the concept of ecological identity. This chapter concludes with a brief exploration of both the challenges and the opportunities that accompany this study.

Chapter 2 initially explores some of the key words and phrases used in the ecological identity discourse in a tentative way and offers them more as "guides" or "signposts" to help "find our way"; however, they needed to be reexamined and redefined as this study progressed. Subsequently, the writing of a number of academics, researchers, and teachers who have contributed to the ecological identity discourse is explored. Following this, I attempt to conceptualize what it means to have ecological identity.

Chapter 3 begins with a brief example from the literature to illustrate the compelling questions that led me to this research effort. I then provide a brief overview of the research related to ecological identity and argue for a form of inquiry that focuses on human experience and the way that we interpret our experience. Following this section, I provide a more detailed account of how hermeneutics developed within the human science tradition and the primary concepts inherent in hermeneutics that help us come to understanding in our day-to-day lives. This chapter concludes with an account of my conversations with the research participants on ecological identity and my gaining an understanding of this research topic in a deeper way.

Chapter 4 begins with a clear description of the process and steps that I used to conduct my research. I then offer brief vignettes from my personal life that reveal how I have come to understand the concept of ecological identity. The predominant portion of this chapter consists of excerpts from my conversations with the social workers whom I engaged in conversation about my research topic. Initially, I briefly describe each research participant, and following the excerpts from our conversations, I provide an account of my own reactions and thoughts.

In chapter 5 I provide a hermeneutic account of what it means to have an ecological identity. I begin the chapter by exploring my research topic in both its historic and its linguistic contexts. I then return to the conversations with my research participants and explore particular events that occurred during our conversations that struck me as potential opportunities to help me to understand my research topic in more depth. Subsequently, I return to a wilderness setting myself to integrate and synthesize my new learning with my own experiences in a natural setting. I conclude this chapter by identifying key questions that surfaced as a result of my research efforts and answer them in a way that leads to a deeper understanding of what it means to have an ecological identity. I also pose these questions to engage my readers in a way that will encourage them to join me in further conversation about my research topic.

Chapter 6 addresses my newfound understanding related to ecological identity and how it applies to the practice of social work and my role as a social work educator. Initially, I review what I have learned about the concept of ecological identity and its potential impact on social work practice and teaching. I then point out ways that one might be able to link the ecological realities of our lives with the social problems that we face today. Next, I return to my conversations with the research participants and pay special attention to the experiences, ideas, and language (related to the question of application) that are different from mine. Following this section, I discuss the concept of ecopedagogy and explore ways that I can apply my newfound learning to my role as a social work educator. I conclude this chapter and dissertation with a discussion of how this research endeavor has changed me and a brief poetic offering that reveals the role that ecological identity plays in my life.

## Person in Environment

To continue the process of setting the context and determining the relevance of this study, it is important to critically reflect upon the person-in-environment construct, which is a key component of the theoretical foundation of social work practice (Karls & Wandrei, 1994). This concept is used as a metaphor to capture the idea that humans are in a dynamic relationship with the world around them. The point at which people cope with and adapt to their social and economic surroundings is the place at which social work intervention begins (Compton & Galaway, 1994). Unfortunately, the person-in-environment perspective has not captured the fact that humans share their environment with other sentient beings. Nor is the fact taken into account that the social worker and his or her "client" share the very necessities of life (air, water, nitrogen, etc.) that surround them. Work in this context is done "for the client"; there is no acknowledgement that worker and client share what Khoshoo (1999) called the "present moment" (p. 232) of coexistence.

The person-in-environment perspective in social work has fallen prey to a similar problem that has occurred in the modern-day environmental movement. A number of writers (Evernden, 1992; Fisher, 2002; Naess, 1987) have argued that the term *environment* is much too abstract and as a result has not captured our fundamental relationship with the earth. In this regard the environment is seen as "out there," maintaining a person-environment split that has prevented us from making meaningful change. The environment, on all accounts, is still an object that can be manipulated to meet our human needs and managed in a way that gives us the illusion that we are "protecting the environment."

In a similar light, the person-in-environment perspective relocates social work students (and practitioners) to the outside, to looking "into" their clients. This perpetuates a worker-client separation that maintains the illusion of objectivity and distance and does nothing to enhance the idea that two human "bodies" (social worker and client) are engaged in a deeply interdependent relationship; that is, they share the same life source. Reinforced by this narrow view of ourselves, we are limited in how we can think and act. Bretherton (2003) suggested that this alienation from the natural world is the source of both the ecological crisis and the social malaise that we face today.

Social work educator David Besthorn (1997) argued that the person-in-environment construct is highly problematic, does not provide an adequate base for social work practice, and does not capture the deep connection humans have with nature. "Nowhere is this conceptual difficulty more profound than in social work's nearly complete disregard for integrating a comprehensive understanding of the natural environment and its influence on human behavior, quality of life and the definition of self" (p. 2) This restricts social work knowledge and services to the personal domain and dismisses the environment as a broad, vague, and benign backdrop to human activity. In Besthorn's opinion, social work's inability to develop a theoretical stance that encompasses the human-nature relationship leads to a significant contradiction. It fundamentally challenges social work's claim that it understands humans and the problems they face in a contextual and holistic manner.

Social work's inability to develop a comprehensive understanding of the human-nature relationship stems from a number of factors. As a young profession at the turn of the 20th century, social work relied heavily upon psychodynamic theory to gain status as a profession. Focusing upon individual pathology and utilizing theories such as psychoanalytic theory helped to give the profession the appearance that it was based on a coherent theoretical and scientific framework. However, Besthorn (1997) believed that social work's constant disregard for including the natural environment in its understanding of the human condition is primarily precipitated by social work's reliance upon the logic and methodology of the modernist world view. As Besthorn succinctly stated:

> The philosophical assumptions of modernism typically narrow the definition of person and environment by removing the idea of nature from both constructs. The result is an alienation of person from environment. Nature becomes essentially other—separate from any identification with person. (p. 4)

Coates (2003) suggested that social work's reliance upon the modernist paradigm has transformed the social work profession into a "domesticated profession" (p. 38) More specifically, Coates argued that social work's preoccupation with modernist beliefs has caused the profession to become "co-dependent" with society's propensity to destroy nature. Social work practice that focuses solely upon the "fit" between the person and his or her social environment while excluding the natural environment yields dubious and ethically questionable results. Social work becomes an ameliorating activity that maintains the status quo by focusing on symptoms rather than causes. In social work's attempts to help others, it fails to acknowledge the role of environmental destruction in human suffering. The profession also loses the potential to contemplate nature as an ally in any healing or change process. Most important, social work fails to challenge the ontocidal beliefs and values that separate humans from the rest of nature.

In Coates's (2003) view, modern society's emphasis on personal freedom, consumerism, and technology have led humans to become "detached and alienated, not only from nature but also from each other" (p. 8). Both Besthorn (1997) and Coates argued that social work has accepted a narrow understanding of identity supported by the modernist viewpoint, which limits our sense of identity by linking identity to the social groups to which we belong and ignoring the natural environment. In many ways Coates and Besthorn suggested that modern identity is schizophrenic in nature. We acknowledge our identity through social connection but not through our connection with nature. They both contended that this restricts our understanding of human suffering and limits the way we respond to it. This restricted understanding of identity leaves humans with the capacity to fend for themselves but unable to respond effectively to the suffering of others (human or nonhuman). In turn, humans may be able to acknowledge human suffering, but this suffering is always considered in isolation and never understood in a wider context (human or nonhuman).

## Identity Crisis

Thomas Berry (1988) explained that we are in a place in our history where the consequences of our behavior extend far beyond the narrow identities we have created for ourselves. What we do and how we behave not only affect our local environment, but also carry out into the world beyond our immediate lived space. Berry skillfully pointed out the irony that we are the only species on earth that pollutes its own home and suggested that within a very short time we will have no choice but to rethink our identity. He argued that we are entering an era in which resources will become scarce and our ability to escape both social and environmental calamity will in large part be determined by how we transform our understanding of ourselves.

Further to Berry's (1988) comments is the compelling evidence of an unparalleled degradation and destruction of our natural environment. The loss of wetlands, pollution of ground water, increase in global warming, and reduction in the ozone layer are only a few of the environmental challenges that we face today (Union of Concerned Scientists; as cited in Caldwell, 1999). These challenges have led to a plethora of concerns related to the ability of the human race to respond in a relevant and timely way. The daunting environmental challenge that we face led well-known environmentalist Lynton Caldwell to ask an obvious but difficult question: "Is humanity destined to self-destruct?" (p. 3).

The answer to Caldwell's (1999) question depends upon our capacity to respond to this crisis. In her book *Silent Spring*, Rachael Carson (1960) provided a "wake-up call" to Western society. She clearly traced how pesticides have entered the food change through insects, which have then killed the larger animals that ingested them. Carson was instrumental in providing scientific evidence that links the consequences of human behavior with the natural environment. There have been more dramatic examples since Carson's important work, but humanity's response has been largely ineffective.

In the context of this study it important to point out that environmental destruction generates issues of social justice as well. Besthorn (2000, p. 2) proposed that poverty must be seen not only in the lack of financial assistance and social support infrastructure, but also in polluted water supplies, poisoned air, and unhealthy living quarters. Coates

(2003) convincingly argued that humans who live in poverty or belong to marginalized groups suffer the most from environmental destruction. The UNDP (1998) clearly reported that Aboriginal peoples, poor people, and those from developing countries suffer increased economic and health problems as a result of environmental degradation: "The world's dominant consumers are overwhelmingly concentrated among the well-off—but the environmental damage from the world's consumption falls more severely on the poor" (p. 4). Caldwell (1999) made the point that the phrase "our common future" is fallacious in that it implies that we will all suffer the consequences of environmental destruction equally. He argued that as the social and economic pressures from environmental destruction increase, the wealthy (because of the resources available to them) will be able to cope with and resist the stressors related to ecological destruction much more effectively than will the poor.

Although social injustice related to environmental destruction must be addressed, there are other, more profound consequences associated with ecological destruction. The ecological destruction of our planet threatens not only our physical survival, but also our emotional, psychological, and spiritual survival. If we believe, as Besthorn (2000) proposed, that "nature is the tangible core or ground of all our human experience and . . . becomes our great cosmic interrogative—a penultimate question of life or death of humankind—and . . . is the question that makes relative all other questions…" (p. 2), it is easy to see how the destruction of our planet essentially cripples our ability to create meaning. Fisher (2002) metaphorically described the process of strip mining as a process of stripping meaning from our lives. As ecosystems and natural habitats disappear, it becomes more and more difficult to determine what our place in the world is and how to

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respond to the social and ecological crisis that we face. There are many social, economic, and political reasons for our inability to respond directly to the challenges of social injustice and the loss of essential sources of meaning in our lives. Berry and others (Gottschalk, 2001; Light, 2000; Macy, 1994; Tomashow, 1995) argued, however, that the core of our ineptitude originates within our narrow understanding of ourselves.

Our struggle to overcome this narrow understanding of ourselves stems, in part, from an identity that is anchored and limited by the Western preoccupation with the "self." With regard to the modern self and the expression of identity, Roy Baumeister (1997) historically traced the changing nature of selfhood in Western society. He described the transformation of the Western understanding of self from a collective relational understanding to more of an isolated, individual, internal sense of self. Baumeister provided a thorough account of how politics, economics, and religion have played an important role in the development of the autonomous self and explained that the modern sense of self "creates a paradox or tension that finds the self existing outside of its particular connections but at the same time looking for such connections" (p. 195). Baumeister portrayed a human identity that is preoccupied with the importance of and overidentification with self. The psychological and social ramifications of this preoccupation are significant. Self-awareness becomes a matter of examining inner realms to learn the elusive truths about a presumably extensive and fixed *nature*. Lost is the ability to learn more about ourselves through relationship with the myriad of "Others" that surround us.

Modern society's preoccupation with the self leads to what Baumeister (1997) described as the "burden of selfhood" (p. 203). This burden begins with assigning to the self the task of both creating and discovering itself. This is all to be done in isolation and exempt from the social and natural surroundings. Because the self is not only assigned the responsibility of moral authority, but also seen as a source of great value, the need to protect and defend the self also becomes great. In this regard the Western preoccupation with the self limits and narrows the way that we define problems of living. Finding the road to self-knowledge becomes a crucial task in addressing the perils of the modern world. Problems are defined and tied to self-esteem, and individual change is tied to the goal of helping people feel better about themselves. Protecting and advancing the self becomes our primary mission in life. This may be helpful in maintaining the self but hampers our sensitivity and responsiveness to the struggle of others. As Baumeister stated, “Self-esteem is generally a benefit to the individual but a cost or risk to those around him or her” (p. 211).

Baumeister (1997) drew our attention to the implications of the Western notion of identity, constricted by our preoccupation with self, impacting our ability to help others. He suggested that in Western society the notion of serving others has actually involved a process of serving the self and that in part many of the social problems that we face today, such as violence, addictions, eating disorders, and even suicide, reflect the human need to escape the burden of modern selfhood. Baumeister raised concerns about our ability to care for others and wondered whether the elevation of self is actually taking precedence over concern for others.

This social-ecological crisis that we are facing is accompanied by what Langbaum (1982) described as a generalized postmodern identity crisis (p. 352). Within these postmodern (or hypermodern) times we seem preoccupied with the notion of identity

(Ashmore & Jussin, 1997; Sarup, 1996). Underlying this preoccupation is an apparent desperation or anxiety to determine who we are and what our place in the world is (Smith, 1999 a ). These are clues that something is amiss in our culture because we have become insecure in our ability to determine our identity through the more traditional means of family, social, or ethnic group. In general, postmodern times are characterized by a fragmentation or splintering of identity, which makes it difficult to develop a coherent sense of self (Gergen, 1991). The reasons for this, of course, are many. Warde (1994) argued that our focus on consumerism plays a crucial role in the identity struggles that we face today. He suggested that our overidentification with consumer products actually links our identity to material goods. In this case we become embedded in an economic system that begins to play an important role in determining who we are (or who we should be). More important, it negates the significant role of our primary social groups in helping us to determine our identity. In addition, we are presented with a multitude of products, which leads to an array of choices and a particular stress because not only do we have to chose what "identity" best fits us, but we are also left with the difficult task of constructing an identity on our own. Warde suggested that this link between identity and consumerism leaves us socially unattached and isolated, which he compared to a type of identity suicide.

In a similar but perhaps more complex way, Baudrillard (as cited in Sarup, 1996) questioned the role of technology in determining (or hampering) any sense of identity. He contended that the postmodern world is characterized by a hyperprevalence of symbols, text, and images. Technology such as television, computers, and the corresponding world of advertising, media, and digitized representation make it difficult to determine what is real and what is not. Baudrillard described this simulated world as *Simulacra*. He believed that because this specular world is so prevalent, it is easy to become "trapped" in this prevalence of the artificial. In his view this is problematic because our more and more frequent identification with images, text, and fabrication puts the notion of identity into serious question.

Similar to Baudillard's (as cited in Sarup, 1996) concern, Niedzviecki (2004) maintained that the massive "wall" of white noise generated by film television, the Web, and print media has reached an all-consuming, inescapable critical mass. In this hyperdigitized context it becomes difficult to develop and create any form of lasting or substantial identity. More specifically, Niedzviecki forcefully argued that society's almost pathological desire for individuality has been subsumed by corporate mass culture and is then doled back out to us in packaged versions. In our desperate need for an identity based on individuality, we uncritically adopt the packaged versions offered (at a premium, of course) to us by popular culture. In an ironic sense this in fact leads to a process of identity formation based on imitation and replication. There is no creative process inherent in this type of identity formation, and in a paradoxical way we lose our ability to create our identity in any organic sense because we are "colonized" by mass media. The consequence of this type of determination of identity is significant. Because we put so much pressure on ourselves to develop an identity of individuality, we become desperate to manufacture or invent one. In turn, we rely upon the hyperpresent mass-culture machine to determine ourselves. Niedzviecki raised the concern that this denies any possibility of identity formation through any sort of communal traditions. The only tradition we have now is the tradition of rampant individualism. As Niedzviecki states:

> The tradition of reinventing yourselves to be who ever you are. It's a tradition of no tradition. This, to me, is where we're slowly approaching in our society, and it's a society where we have no memory, no inhibitions and boundless ambition . . . . Now we are here and we have to face the consequences. (p. 9)

It is difficult to discuss human identity without considering the impact of globalization. Maalouf (2000) warned that the juggernaut of American identity saturated with capitalistic tendencies is sweeping the world and demarking battle lines of identity throughout the world. In a more subtle but no less important sense, Bauman (2003) cautioned that globalization is having a deep impact on our ability to develop identity and in turn is hampering our ability to care for one another. Transborder migration and out-of-context employment sites make it difficult to form identity. The transience inherent in globalization makes it difficult to develop long-term relationships and makes it more important that we rely upon ourselves to "survive" the world. Worksites and living arrangements do not exist within a particular community and leave us "once removed" from the immediate people with whom we share space. Because communication is a necessary ingredient in any relationship, Bauman questioned the role that technology plays in this process. He suggested that the "spasms of virtual proximity" (p. 62) that we share with one another favor farness over nearness and connection over engagement. Within this highly globalized context, Bauman contended that our human identity becomes underdefined, which leads to certain risks and anxieties. We adopt a survivor mentality that looks to other people for what they can do to help us maintain our identity. Most important, we lose the ability to "love thy neighbor," which Bauman considered "the birth act of Humanity" (p. 78).

Sarup (1996) proposed that the postmodern identity is characterized as lacking a certain emotional, intellectual, and embodied depth. As a result, our identity lacks a particular coherence and becomes easily "fractured." In this regard the literature related to identity theory has begun to address the implications of a *multiple* or a *plural* self. The discourse on this topic ranges from suggestions that the multiplicity of identity is not a serious problem to arguments for a more unified, stable sense of identity. Gergen (1991) in particular questioned the ability of those from Western cultures to find unity and purpose in their identity given the challenges that we face today:

> Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to a reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold. (p. 71)

Best and Kellner (2001) identified a myriad of challenges that the "postmodern adventure" has presented to human identity. The rapid technological and social changes in our lives have led humans to a particular crisis of identity:

> Because of intense social and technological developments, not only are human beings reshaping their ethnic, gender, and political identities, but humanity as a species is starting to seriously rethink its status in response to ecology and environmental ethics, and smart machines. (p. 10)

Best and Kellner described the postmodern adventure and the determination of human identity as risky endeavors that will have a serious impact on the fate of the human race.

Deeply embedded in the postmodern crisis of identity is what Sturm (2005) succinctly termed a "crisis of alterity" (p. 2). In his view, humans have neglected the role of the Other in our lives even though the Other plays an existential role in every moment of our lives. In this regard we fail to ask important questions such as

> Who is the other that confronts me? What have I to do with the other? What difference does the other make to me? What have I to do with the other? What difference does the other make to me? Why should I worry about the other? In what way is the other of importance to my destiny. (p. 19)

Sturm argued that how we respond to these questions is of grave importance to the *other* and, reflexively, to ourselves because "what we, both other and self, are and can become is contingent, in large part, on the quality of our interaction" (p. 19).

Sturm's (2005) comments are instructive in that they suggest that one way to address the identity crisis that we face today is to allow ourselves to turn our gaze outward to the "Others" with whom we share this planet. In the context of asking the question "What does it mean to have an ecological identity?" Sturm's comments are also important. They suggest that we can learn about ourselves through our relationship with nature and that what we learn about ourselves can have a significant impact upon how we respond to others (both human and nonhuman) around us. If we allow ourselves to learn from nature, we might be able to overcome the narrow identity that we have created for ourselves and in the process be able to respond more directly to the suffering of others.

There is still a great deal more to be explored in this area. Generally, however, it can be said that our identity as human beings is being challenged on numerous fronts. We are challenged not only to respond to the looming social-ecological crisis, but also to make sense of ourselves in a rapidly changing postmodern environment. How we come to grips with this task will in large part determine how successful we are in addressing the problems that we face today. To instill a sense of hope for the future, perhaps it would be helpful to draw upon the Chinese symbol that represents crisis and its revelation that in crisis there is also opportunity.

## Ecology/Identity

Over the last two decades there has been a considerable increase in the number of academic articles written on the concept of ecological identity. A central theme throughout these articles is the argument that our identity as human beings must encompass our fundamental relationship with nature. Combining the concept of identity and ecology, however, has not been an easy task. As the discourse grows, questions related to ecological identity and its specific characteristics, practicality and ontology, surface (Light, 2000). Answering these questions is difficult because, as Hall (1996) pointed out, any discussion related to identity involves the complex task of integrating subjective experiences, cultural assumptions, and ideological orientations.

Ecological identity is no doubt a difficult concept to grasp. Nevertheless, the potential benefits of exploring its meaning far outweigh the struggles that we face in trying to explain it. Understanding ecological identity has significant potential to address the psychological (Fisher, 2002; Nicholsen, 2002), social (Bretherton, 2003; Heller, 1999), and ecological (Berry, 1988; Tomashow, 1995) challenges of our times. Perhaps the best way to begin to understand this complex concept is to initially explore the meaning of the words *ecology* and *identity* and then engage in a synthesis of the two to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what this concept entails.

The *Houghton-Mifflin Canadian Dictionary of the English Language* (Morris, 1982) defined *ecology* in two ways: “the science of the relationships between organisms and their environments” and “the relationship between organisms and their environments” (p. 241). It is interesting that the etymological origin of the word is the Greek *oikos*, which means “house” or “dwelling.” Literally, the term ecology means the *logos*, the reflection on or study of the *oikos*, or household. In these two definitions is an inherent tension. The first definition, scientific in nature, has a tendency to reduce the relationship between organisms and their environment to mere objective and quantitative terms, whereas the second definition allows for a more experiential, perhaps more direct understanding of these relationships. Rather than separating us from nature (as detached observers), the second definition pulls us into the realm of these relationships and allows us to be part of the "household."

> Ecology thus calls upon us to begin to think of the entire planet as a kind of community of which we are members. It means making sense of the relations that human beings and other living things have towards the overall patterns of nature in ways that give us some sense of their proper relations to one another, to ourselves, and to the whole. (Clark, 1998, p. 416)

The *Houghton-Mifflin Canadian Dictionary of the English Language* (Morris, 1996) defined *identity* as "sameness of essential character; . . . individuality; . . . the fact of being the same person or thing as being claimed" (p. 365). In a similar manner, the word *identify* refers to "the process of regarding something or someone as identical which leads to formation of an identity stemming from the psychological practice of identification" (p. 365). In this regard the terms *identification* and *identity* are deeply intertwined. In part, our identity stems from the identifications that we make in the world. When we identify with an "Other," we feel similar to him or her. As Sarup (1996) explained, "We are not born with an identity; we have to identify to get one" (p. 30).

The process of identification is a central concept in the literature related to ecological identity. Identification is described as a process in which people begin to experience a similarity or kinship with the greater-than-human world around them (Fox, 1990). Social biologists have suggested that our immediate identification (to our primary social groups) is genetically predetermined in mammals in order to increase the chances of survival. Although this may have helped humans in the past, researchers on ecological identity have compelled us to expand our identifications to look not only to our immediate social groups, but also "outward" to the air, water, and soil that sustain us. The process of identification may begin with our immediate caregiver (as Freud suggested), but it does not have to stop there.

Identity as differentiated from identification is a much more difficult concept to grasp because it is not a static phenomenon, but is in a constant state of perpetual emergence (Maalouf, 2000; Sarup, 1996). In addition, when we try to name who we are, we always leave out other identifications and can never name our selves entirely. Identity and identity formation therefore involve a moment-to-moment process of becoming and emerge from the identifications that we have made in our lives. In the literature this dynamic process has been described as *selfing*—a stream-of-consciousness phenomenon (Ashmore & Jussin, 1997). An ecological identity co-emerges not only with our social environment, but also within the unfolding, complex web of life and energy that we call nature.

Clayton and Opotow (2003) argued that it is erroneous not to consider our relationship with nature in identity formation, but it is also problematic to neglect the role that society plays in the development of an ecological identity. They believed that society plays an important role in the formation of an ecological identity: "How we understand ourselves in nature is infused with culturally influenced understandings of what nature is—what is to be shared, revered, reviled, or utilized" (p. 10) To understand the role of society in the formation of an ecological identity, Clayton and Opotow suggested the use of the gestalt concepts of foreground and background. Foreground can be considered an individual's direct experience with nature and background as the role that society plays in interpreting and describing our experience. As we identify with nature (foreground), social variables such as language and social-political contexts (background) play a role in our capacity to identify with the natural environment. As Clayton and Opotow stated, "Although this depiction of identity is static, in actuality, environmental identity is complicated by a dynamic interplay between social and environmental" (p. 11).

Clayton and Opotow's (2003) comments are also instructive in that they suggest that an identity formation process that involves nature has a deeply dialectical relationship with one's participation in society: "One's social orientation leads to ways to position oneself environmentally, while one's environmental orientation leads to ways to position oneself socially" (p. 12). This observation is important in two ways: (a) It suggests that developing an ecological identity is a political activity because it changes the way that we think, feel, and act in regard to our participation in society; and (b) it also points to the supportive or nonsupportive role that society can play in the development of an ecological identity. For example, particular activist and pro-environmental groups can facilitate an ecological identity, whereas other groups less inclined to support environmental concerns may not. On an interesting note, Clayton and Opotow wondered whether or not an individual can develop an ecological identity by simply participating in environmentally "friendly" social groups. Their most important contribution, however, is their contention that society plays a mitigating role in our ability to understand ourselves as ecological beings and that developing an ecological identity can play an important role in how we conduct ourselves in society.

Ecological identity is in part a reaction to the form of identity that humans have claimed for themselves, especially those from the North American and European traditions. The Western notion of identity is unidimensional and static and encompasses an agenda of confirming humans as detached entities who possess greater value over all "Others" in the world (Merchant, 1992). On first glance, ecological identity entails an understanding of our place in the relational universe (household) in which we live. It emerges within our embodied experience of the world and our particular understanding of place in it (Fisher, 2002). An ecological identity does not emerge from a rational self-confirming process, but more from an emotional opening up to the realization of our interconnectedness with all life on the planet (Fox, 1990).

## The Anthropocentric/Textual Knot

> For many scholars in the radical ecological movement, the twin limitations of excessive textualism and anthropocentrism tie us into a knot that reinforces a cognitive, emotional, and moral autism with regard to the importance of the natural environment. This restricts our imagination and understanding of the concept of identity and encourages certain myopia by placing humans and their constructions as the only object of analysis. (Gottschalk, 2001, p. 6)

Any exploration of ecological identity and its impact on our lives will need to overcome a long history of potent forces. Human identity in Western culture has been formed through a complex history involving Judeo-Christian tradition, Greek and Roman humanism, medieval theology, Renaissance humanism, and modern science. "These forces have perpetuated the anthropocentric view that human beings are wholly unique beings, existing in culture rather than nature, and therefore radically separate from the earth they inhabit and the other life forms that surround them" (Best, 2004, p. 2).

The anthropocentric worldview emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries. Influenced by both the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions, major thinkers of this time such as Francis Bacon and René Descartes propagated the view that humans could control nature. Bacon maintained that, through science, humans could regain the control of nature and redeem themselves (in part) from Adam's "original sin." Descartes (as cited in Sessions, 1995b) contended that the new science would help to make humans the masters and possessors of nature. According to Sessions, "Descartes' infamous 'mind-body' dualism resulted in the view that only humans had minds (or souls): all other creatures were merely bodies (machines). Animals had no sentience (mental life) and so, could feel no pain" (p. 161).

Descartes (as cited in Sessions, 1995a) believed that the founder of modern Western philosophy had a significant impact on the way that we view the world today. For Descartes, the pursuit of knowledge was the ultimate end; he considered the mind the defining characteristic of human beings and saw mind and matter as being fundamentally different from one another. According to Descartes, the material universe is a machine and nothing but a machine, and matter has no purpose, life, or spirituality. Nature works according to mechanical laws, and everything in the world can be explained in terms of the arrangement and movement of its parts (Bai, 2001, p. 10).

The anthropocentric worldview that Bacon and Descartes (as cited in Best, 2004) espoused was reinforced by Renaissance humanism and Judeo-Christian beliefs. They portrayed humans as the central focus in the universe while also supporting the arrogant view that humans have unlimited powers. This led to the positivist science of our current era that has disenchanted the world, reduced nature to objects of manipulation, and estranged human beings from the process of life (Bordo, 1987), which has resulted in a rational (mind-focused) determining of the world. Years of affirming the myth of an isolated, bodiless, emotionless identity have had serious consequences: Humans have been left with a narrow, perhaps crippling understanding of themselves, and any notion of sameness or affinity with nature has been limited.

In addition, the postmodern "project" has not been "friendly" to the development of an ecological identity. Sandilands (1995) emphatically stated that the development of what she called a *natural identity* will not develop within our culture unless there is a radical reorientation of human subjectivity. Frodeman (1992) made a similar point and suggested that the postmodern refusal to address questions of ontology is the crux of its failure to allow for the birth of an ecological identity: "It is the ecological consequences of this political allegiance to Cartesian subjectivity that places postmodernism at odds with radical environmentalism" (p. 315).

The poststructural discourse within postmodernism has drawn particular criticism. There is a growing concern related to the excessive tendency to focus upon the textual construction of identity, society, and reality. Our identity also includes the fact that we are biological beings, and although we may create meaning through our language, we still have essential needs for fresh water and clean air. As deep ecologists and ecopsychologists remind us, we are still organically of nature, from nature; and in a certain sense, we are nature (Shepard, 1996b). Like every other sentient being, we are suspended in webs of complex ecological processes before we are suspended in webs of complex textual symbols (Spretnak, 1991).

In positioning humans and language at the center of its project, the poststructuralist view can be described as anthropocentric. Although poststructuralism has deconstructed the subject, it has not, despite all of its attempts, decentered the human (Gottschalk, 2001). The poststructural discourse still maintains dualistic notions of humans from nonhumans and culture from nature. For deep ecologist Shepard (1982), the assumption that there is nothing outside the text itself represents "the articulation of the profound arrogance of humans which fails to be critically reflexive with regard to this meta-narrative" (p. 160). As Jagtenberg and Mckie (1997) concluded, "In the final analysis, neither materialist dialectics nor poststructural textual analysis are ecological theory—they are resolutely human centered" (p. 127).

## The Question of Identity

Below Paul Gauguin's 19th-century painting of a nature scene in Tahiti he wrote, "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" His questions reflect an existential dilemma that has confronted humans since their earliest days on this planet. It is no surprise that the nature scene compelled Gauguin to ask these questions. Since the earliest stages of human civilization, nature has been a key source of beliefs about who we are. Unfortunately, for many reasons we have become disconnected from nature and have lost the opportunity to gain certain wisdom that is so crucial in this day and age. It is our disconnection and alienation from nature that have led to the serious social and ecological problems that we face today. It is also this schism between ourselves and nature that prevents us from solving these pressing problems.

In retrospect, my experience beside the lake in Ontario compelled me to ask very similar questions to those of Gauguin. I was carrying on a tradition that has been with the human race for ages. The experience helped me to understand my place in the world in a different way and compelled me to act in a way that was congruent with that experience. I felt part of something much greater than myself and wanted to make a contribution to this greater whole. This study is a continuation of this commitment. I wanted to understand in a deeper way how my identity as an ecological being can help me to address the social problems that I face as a social worker. This is why I chose to speak with social workers who demonstrated an interest in this topic and who were willing to share their experiences and learning with me.

The question that I asked social workers—"What does it mean to have an ecological identity, and what implications does it have for your practice?"—is purposely broad because I did not want to limit our discussion by beginning with a question that might foreclose on any path or direction that our conversations might take. In a hermeneutic sense, however, I realize that what they shared with me and how I understand what they shared is mediated through language. Language is never an unconditional representation of reality or truth; there is always a "surplus of meaning" in whatever is said. In many ways my challenge was to live alongside or perhaps through my research topic by maintaining the belief that ecological identity in whatever form it takes always represents another question waiting to be asked.

Our postmodern identity is battered and beleaguered and more focused on personal survival than on caring for others. In light of this context, it seems particularly challenging to suggest that humans look to nature as a source of meaning in their lives. It would be incorrect to assume that somehow I have risen above the forces of identity formation that are inherent in today's world. I too live with the legacy of the modern tradition and experience many challenges to my identity. In this regard, perhaps the biggest danger associated with this study was that I would engage in just one other anthropocentric effort. By this I mean a study that would merely hold me at the centre of all meaning and confirm my identity as separate and independent from nature. The challenge in a personal sense was that I had to be willing to face the risk of being changed by this project. This suggests that engaging in this research has been an emotional process as well and has created feelings of dissonance, confusion, and anxiety.

Among many emotions that I brought to this project was hope. Within the emotion of hope exists the belief that I can make a difference in the world. I hope that this research project will make a difference in the lives of people whom for one reason or another society has marginalized or abandoned. I think of the elderly man in Winnipeg, Manitoba, who lay dead in his bed for two months before anybody noticed. Apparently, the major institution in his community considered him alive because his "payments" were being made on a regular basis via the Internet. I also think of those severely disabled people in Alberta whom a local politician described as "not looking disabled," which reveals a narrow and one-dimensional understanding of what it means to be physically, emotionally, and intellectually challenged in this world. In my opinion, hope is embedded in my research question, "What does it mean to have an ecological identity, and what implications does it have for helping others?" It was built on the assumption that humans can change and that we can do things differently.

# CHAPTER 2:

# ECOLOGICAL IDENTITY

## Introduction

Educator Mitchell Tomashow (1995) is well known for his work in the area of ecological identity. He argued that developing an ecological identity is essential because it is within this realm that an individual develops an ecological worldview. In Tomashow's view, an ecological worldview is built upon the insight that humans are not unique in nature, that all life is interdependent, and that the earth itself is a self-regulating organism. He also insisted that humans can change their way of life only if they take into account their natural capacities and their complex relationships with their environment. Tomashow described this view as dynamic, diverse, and radical.

Tomashow's (1995) work is instructive in that he developed a clear understanding of what it means to possess an ecological identity and the role that it plays in our lives. He suggested that our identity as ecological beings begins with our embodied connections to the natural places (forests, parks, rivers, wild areas) in our lives and that this experienced sense of place is the beginning of the formation of an ecological identity that allows us to expand our identifications to the natural world. A central theme in Tomashow's work is the notion that an ecological identity must be nurtured if we hope to sustain it in our busy, fragmented, postmodern lives.

Tomashow (1995) also linked the concept of ecological identity with the practice of ecological citizenship. He argued that developing an ecological identity is an important source of both ecological and social change, and he described how an ecological identity can reframe a person's point of view, which in turn restructures values, reorganizes perceptions, and alters the individual's self-directed actions. More specifically, he referred to research that explained that individuals with strong emotional and psychological attachments to nature demonstrate ethical consciousness, a lack of self-preoccupation, and strong tendencies to be cooperative (Borden; as cited in Tomashow, 1995). Tomashow also asserted that an ecological identity radicalizes people in that they develop cultural-doubting personalities and tend to solve problems in ways that use ideas rooted in ecological thought.

In Tomashow's (1995) view identification is a core element within the process of developing an ecological identity. In this respect, when nature becomes an "object" of our identification, we develop a feeling of similarity or kinship with it. As our identification with the natural places in our lives deepens, our identification widens and helps reduce our alienation from both the natural and human world. Drawing upon deep ecology theory, Tomashow described the process of identification as a spontaneous, nonrational (but not *ir*rational) process through which we respond to the interests of other beings as our own interests. A core element in Tomashow's work is the notion that an ontology of deep connection to nature must precede any determination of ethical behavior.

## Caring for Others

There is evidence that a discussion related to ecological identity offers an important starting point in considering how we care for others. The literature related to ecological identity casts a different light on how we contemplate questions related to ontology, ethics, and identity politics. An essential theme running throughout the literature on ecological identity is a persistent challenge to the Western notion of identity:

In general, it is criticized for being too narrow, self-focused, and inflexible. Within the ecological identity discourse is an argument to expand the narrow, individualistic notion of identity to encompass the fact that we are highly relational creatures.

Deep ecological thinkers such as Arne Naess (1989a) and Warwick Fox (1990) suggested that a wider identification with nature helps us move from an atomistic, individualistic view of ourselves to a greater sense of interconnectedness and interdependency with the whole of creation. Naess encouraged us to broaden or "widen" our sense of ourselves by identifying with all life forms on this planet. Fox believed that a transpersonal shift is required to help us identify with not only other life forms, but also the cosmos as a whole. Welwood (1983) pointed out that when we let go of what he called the *fortress of the "I,"* a wider perceiving of life (called *Vispana* in Buddhism) can arise and lead to a particular understanding of our duty to serve others:

> Vispana is a panoramic awareness that includes the surrounding environment and helps us see situations in a larger way, beyond how they just affirm or negate "I." This larger awareness is the basis for compassionate action and service to others. (p. 47)

Within this awareness is the challenge to grasp what Roshi (1983) described as the twofold nature of humans as both individual and universal beings. Simply put, we are both parts and the whole simultaneously. In this regard, Nicholsen (2002) argued that we are challenged to comprehend both the particular and the infinite. This requires a binocular vision that allows us to see individual lives in the context of a greater whole. In practice, this suggests that when we serve others we have the responsibility of acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between people and their social, political, and natural environments, which can be likened to the notion of linking the personal with the political and the local with the global:

> This is why local control, sense of place, and collaborative decision making have become so prominent themes in our efforts to deal with the environmental and social crisis. They represent efforts to turn attention back toward particulars and away from the mania of growth, expansion and abstraction. (p. 189)

When we understand the world in this way, our perception also changes. We are able to perceive the inherent multiplicity in the world, and we are able to experience our place in it. Fisher (2002) described this as a *hermeneutic* process, in which we experience our world directly as an embodied place of dwelling and then move outward to ever-widening circles of meaning. We move outward from the particular to the infinite all the time, to return to our embodied sense of connection to the human and nonhuman world around us. Within this process a field of care emerges (Evernden, 1992), and we begin to see other sentient beings as participating in a "field" or horizon in which we mutually participate. As a result we coexist, and our well-being co-emerges with the well-being of others.

The Western notion of identity becomes suspect when we allow ourselves to think beyond the narrow encapsulated boundaries of our skin. Ecofeminists (Gaarde, 1992; Merchant, 1992) have argued that the Western preoccupation with identity has been a patriarchal project that has systematically privileged men and at the same time devalued both women and nature. In this regard identity becomes a political phenomenon in that a hierarchy is created that values certain identities over others. Gray (1981) explained that the top of this hierarchy starts with God and then moves down to men, women, children, nature, and so on. In Gray's view, the hierarchy creates conditions that are ripe for abuse and exploitation of those identities at the bottom of the hierarchy.

In this light identity becomes a major obstacle to serving others and a foundation for the identity oppression we see today. Racism, sexism, ageism, and specieism are all embedded in our social relations, which has created an ethos of differentiation. As Webster (2002) succinctly stated:

> At birth each of us is stamped with identities based on different anatomical and cultural characteristics that the child certainly cannot yet possess. Through successive ways of inculcation, humans beings come to belong to a particular gender, race culture, and nation. (p. 18)

In response to this categorizing and differentiating process, Webster asked, "Could the repression and absence of a broader sense of self be responsible for many of the social and ecological problems we face today?" (p. 18). He pointed out the consequences: "After all, people who are constantly being made aware of themselves as belonging to different sexes, races, and ethnic groups should be expected to discriminate against one another" (p. 18). To remedy this problem Webster called for a broader, more inclusive human identity.

In summary, a broader identification with the world around us helps us to develop a deeper sense of our responsibility to care for others. Caring for others involves a particular perception that does not necessarily focus upon specific identities, but more on a field of relations that considers shared space, quality of relationship, and implications for the whole. Identity "construction" in the Western world in particular is seen as a process that benefits only a few and establishes a mode of human interaction that perpetuates violence and exploitation. This compels those who want to help others to establish relationships in which power is mutually shared. Finally, a direct link is made between our social institutions and the natural world and compels us to consider the ethical responsibility of creating a human community that allows both humans and nature to thrive.

## Deep Ecology

A great deal of the discussion related to ecological identity emerges within the ecological philosophy (ecosophy) of deep ecology. In this regard it is important to explore the primary tenets of deep ecology to gain a better understanding of how the concept of ecological identity is conceptualized. In addition, it is also important to describe the criticism levied towards deep ecology because it will help to clarify the political, ontological, and practical challenges associated with developing a coherent understanding of the concept of ecological identity. Exploring deep ecology in this manner will also help to determine the landscape that will need to be covered to set the direction for an effective research endeavor.

The ecosophy of deep ecology was primarily developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. Naess's development of deep ecology took place in the early 1970s and has been a central part of the environmental debate over the last 30 years. Naess (1995) described deep ecology as being based upon the philosophical traditions of Christianity, Buddhism, and the work of Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza. Generally speaking, three basic themes run through deep ecological thought. Naess argued for an ecocentric versus an anthropocentric understanding of the world. An ecocentric view of the world asserts that the nonhuman world has intrinsic value in itself and is not dependent upon its obvious instrumental value to humans. The second theme posits that only by adopting a critical attitude towards our relationships with nature will we be able to address the social and ecological crisis of our times. In this regard Naess emphasized the important role of questioning in helping to uncover the inherent difficulties in our relationship with nature. The third theme includes the idea that humans are capable of identifying far more widely and deeply with the world around them than normally takes place. Naess viewed this potential of a wider identification with the natural world as encompassing a self-development process towards self-realization.

Although all three themes are clearly linked, the theme related to identification and the development of a wider sense of self speaks most directly to this study. Naess's (1995) deep ecology strongly suggests a realization of self that extends beyond any narrowly limited or egoic sense of self. In his view, broadening and deepening our identifications (feeling of commonality) with the world around us leads from a narrow, atomistic, isolated, and particular-like sense of self to a wide, expansive, participatory, or field-like one. Fox (1996) described the process of identification within deep ecology as transpersonal because our identification moves outward from a personal extension of identification (family, community, etc.) to an ontological extension of identification, characterized by a focus on the deeply interdependent nature of existence. Griffiths (2002) described this process clearly:

> Naess asks the individual to lose herself entirely in the vastness of the One, and to return from the experience existentially altered-invested with a sense of her relationship to an infinite whole . . . . Naess defines this as self realization not of the individual self associated with psychotherapy and new age "self –help" mantras, but of the universal Self, of which the individual is merely a part. (p. 261)

Naess (1989a) argued strongly that the experience of identification with nature and the awareness that accompanies it is the starting point from which ethical action begins. Naess used the Kantian differentiation between "moral" and "beautiful" action: "Moral action are motivated by acceptance of moral law, and manifest themselves clearly when acting against inclination. A person acts beautifully when acting benevolently from inclination" (pp. 85-86). In this regard Naess contended that environmental ethics that arise from the provocations of "ought " and "should" are often unsustainable, but those that emerge from a "deep" experience of nature tend to persevere and lead to a more significant commitment to action. More specifically, Naess explained that a wider identification with nature can lead to an embodied experience that he described as "a deep yes" (p. 20). This experience confirms our connection to other life forms around us and leads to a platform of action underpinned by the belief of "live and let live" (Naess, 1995, p. 80). This platform of action calls upon deep ecology thinkers to act in ways that are congruent with their experience and offers a number of principles that help to set the direction for an ecological sustainable lifestyle.

Many of Naess's (1989b) examples suggest that the process of identification with nature and the expansion of self take place in wilderness settings. Being a mountaineer himself, Naess argued that an intense nature experience provides the impetus for a reevaluation of the self as the centre of all things and in turn leads to a reordering of priorities in our lives. The expansion of the self for Naess is an ecstatic process that involves what Griffiths (2002) identified as an "intermingling of self, nature and god" (p. 261). Naess described this as a gestalt experience with a number of layers, but purposely refrained from "naming it" because of his belief that different people manifest it in different ways. However, he suggested that to encounter nature in this way, we must be able to respond to nature in a different way than simply to recognize the trees, sky, and terrain around us as mere matter. He argued eloquently that the valleys, mountains, and rivers in our lives have their own subjectivity and have the potential to speak to us. In this regard he argued that we not only see mountains, but we also experience them. He also suggested that a crucial role for educators is to revive this capacity amongst people to respond to the invitation that nature offers.

## Deep Ecology Critique

Criticism of deep ecology revolves around psychological, social, and ontological concerns. Drengson (1991) warned that, because the process of identification is primarily a psychoanalytic term, a primarily romantic view of identification with nature ignores the role of the unconscious in the identification process. In his view the deep ecology notion of identification assumes that a person has a strong sense of self-worth and loves him-/herself. He linked his concerns to how Western society raises children and suggested that Western society generally raises children whose unconscious is filled with repressed emotions and pain from childhood. In this regard Drengson cautioned that humans who are not emotionally and psychological whole may identify with nature in pathological ways. I will say more about the forms of pathological identifications that Drengson described, but at this point it is important to highlight his point that how society raises children can have either a beneficial or a negative impact on our ability to develop an ecological identity.

The social-political critique of deep ecology arises from a number of fronts. Anthony (1995) suggested that by and large the deep ecological discourse has been dominated by White middle-class men. Ecological identity has not encompassed a multicultural identity, and the notion of diversity and interdependence with nature has not in practice extended to embrace human diversity. In Anthony's view the only ecological identity that seems to exist is a white identity (p. 263). The predominant critique in a social-political sense, however, is that deep ecology theory fails to acknowledge existing social conditions that cause irreparable damage to the environment and thwart a multitude of "different" identities from emerging. Merchant (1992) criticized deep ecology theorists for not addressing the totalitarian, hegemonic, and hierarchical beliefs that are embedded in our social structures. Merchant argued that the theme of authoritarianism, so prevalent in our society, is the root cause of our environmental problems.

Whereas social ecologists criticize deep ecology for its failure to address flawed social structures, ecofeminists criticize deep ecology more along gender lines. Ecofeminists argue that it is andropocentrism (male centeredness) and not anthropocentrism (human centeredness) that is the root cause of our environmental crisis (Merchant, 1992). From an ecofeminist perspective, deep ecology fails to counter the patriarchal privilege that dominates Western society and has been associated with maintaining and protecting primarily White male interests while at the same time destroying the environment. The traits of objectivity, individualism, and competitiveness are all supported to advance male interests and ways of being, whereas intersubjectivity, relationship, and cooperation and caring are deemed to have lesser value. It is this value inversion that ecofeminists believe is the root cause of our social and environmental crisis.

In regard to the ontological critique of deep ecology, a number of concerns have been raised. Zimmerman (2000) was suspicious of the deep ecology notion of a complete identification with a fictitious cosmic whole. He argued that giving oneself over to a greater whole, especially one based upon a deep "yes," could lead to fanaticism and potentially violent behavior. He linked his concerns to the development of Nazism and the rhetoric of protecting the "land" for all people and thereby linking blood and soil.

Ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2000) also launched an important critique on ontological grounds. She suggested that the deep ecology notion of the expansion of self, based upon an affinity with nature, through similarity is problematic and that establishing a relationship with nature via familiarly or sameness restricts the ability to understand this relationship through difference and diversity. She proposed that the discourse related to identity through similarity is in fact a continuation of the colonization efforts that have plagued the human race for ages.

This discussion related to deep ecology and the criticism directed towards it helps to point to a number of areas that need to be discussed in more detail to foster a deeper understanding of the concept of ecological identity. Drengson's (1991) comments are instructive in that they point to the importance of understanding the role of the unconscious in identity formation and, in particular, calls for a more detailed look at the process of identification in a psychoanalytic context. His comments related to the potential of children to develop an ecological identity are also worth exploring in more detail. In regard to ontological concerns, it seems appropriate initially to address our relationship to the "other" and then move into a more specific discussion on the question of ontology and identity. Exploring these topics in more detail will provide a helpful starting point from which to offer a beginning conceptualization of ecological identity.

## Child's Play

*I Am the Birch Trees*

I am the birch trees
Calling morning to come,
I am the wind,
Who whistles through the branches of the trees,
I am the birch forest,
Bringing peace and happiness to earth,
I am the deer,
Who runs swiftly through the woods,
I am the birch trees,
Waiting for night to fall.
(Josephine Junas-Grant, Grade 6 student at Parkallen
School; with permission)

A growing body of literature links children's cognitive and emotional development with their relationship to nature. Within this body of literature is an emerging interest related to the concept of ecological identity and, more specifically, to the role of nature in children's identity formation. It is important to explore children's identity experiences in nature because growing evidence suggests that these early experience have a direct impact on the worldview that we assume as adults (Chawla, 1986, 1990; Cobb, 1959; Hoffman, 1992). These early experiences can also be linked to the choices that we subsequently make about how we behave towards the natural environment. Adults who are considered environmentalist by their views and behavior often refer to their early childhood experiences in nature as a prime source for their pro-environment stance. In the literature related to ecological identity, there is also interest in exploring the origins of children's tendency to affiliate with nature. This interest is accompanied with a growing concern about how the unchecked destruction and depletion of nature will impact children's identity formation.

One explanation for children's tendency to be attracted to nature is E. O. Wilson's (1984) the *biophilia hypothesis*. Initially, Wilson described biophilia as the innate human tendency to affiliate with natural things. Later in his writings, Wilson (1993) linked the role of emotions to this process and suggested that when we encounter living things, we experience emotions from "attraction to aversion, from awe to indifference, [and] from peacefulness to fear driven anxiety" (p. 31). This particular sensitivity to the natural world is seen initially as an adaptive mechanism that helped humans in hunter gathering societies to be alert to both the potential threats and the resources available to them in their natural environment. In this regard, the biophilia hypothesis suggests that our tendency to draw meaning from our relationship with nature is founded on an inherited tendency (genetically predisposed) that developed thousands of years ago.

In an attempt to determine the biophilia hypothesis, Verbeek and de Waal (2002) undertook a comprehensive study that involved apes and gorillas. They observed that the emotional and cognitive development of apes and gorillas is deeply intertwined with their exploration of the natural world and that primates are able to manipulate and exploit their natural habitat in a way that meets their physical needs. Primates are also able to determine where an abundance of food lies in their environment and can communicate this with other members of their species. Verbeek and de Waal also made a strong argument to support the idea that apes and gorillas exhibit behavior that can be described as a sense of wonder towards the natural world.

Heerwagen and Orians (2002) attempted to extend the biophilia hypothesis from primates to the lives of children. They argued that the development patterns in childhood occur in concert with their relationship to the natural environment. For example, children's initial fear of strangers and the attachment and differentiation process that children undergo unfold in a manner that promotes the best chance of survival. Heerwagen and Orians pointed to the young child's propensity to be enamored initially by objects close at hand as an evolutionary inheritance that keeps the child close to adults and safe from environmental hazards. They also reported that young children's propensity to put things in their mouths diminishes as their cognitive abilities improve and suggested that this process transpires in a way that allows children to understand what is appropriate and not appropriate to eat as they move away from their primary caregiver.

Coley, Solomon, and Shafto (2002) connected children's cognitive development and the emergence of a world view with their encounters with the natural environment. They suggested that children's propensity to engage and learn from nature have both quantitative and qualitative components. Quantitative knowledge originates from the child's propensity to label and classify natural things, whereas qualitative knowledge stems from their experience, which causes them to undergo a process that encompasses a changing view of themselves and the world. Kahn (1997) argued that the biophilia hypothesis entails the notion that a child's interaction with nature encompasses both negative and positive emotions and that the negative emotions (which he described as biophobic) are primarily enhanced by a culture that has treated nature as a stranger. Kahn suggested that enhancing the biophilia hypothesis and encouraging children's involvement in nature helps to address these negative emotions in a way that will help to develop a more life-affirming orientation. An important message in Kahn's and others' work is their assertion that children have an abiding affiliation with nature and that "nature is not a mere cultural convention . . . but part of a physical and biological reality that bounds children's cognition" (p. 54).

In regard to identity and identity formation, Gebhard, Nevers, and Bilmann-Mahecha (2003) suggested that the tendency to deny the role of nature in identity formation is most pronounced in the literature related to children. On children's identity formation they stated, "The significance of our nonhuman environment has been given very little attention so far . . . . Plants, animals, wind and water play at best an insignificant part in most theories of identity formation" (p. 91). These researchers suggested that children's identification with nature involves a process of comparison that includes distinguishing oneself from some things and identifying with others and that children identify with nature through the process of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphic interpretation involves viewing objects in nature such as a tree or a bird as similar to oneself because they possess human-like qualities. Children often refer to animals as being alive and are able to empathize with the animals' ability to feel pain because they relate it to their own experience of pain. In this regard Gebhard et al. argued that children's knowledge and understanding of themselves can lead to a better understanding of the nonhuman entity that they encounter, and in turn, the plant, animal, or ecosystem that the child observes can be a source of enhanced self-understanding. The process of anthropomorphic interpretation is seen as a widespread factor in how children up to the age of 12 relate to and identity with nature.

This process of anthropomorphism is also considered a key influence in how children address conflict between humans and nonhumans and an essential factor in their moralizing behavior. Children are able to relate to nature through their own bodily experiences in which suffering and pain occur. As a result they are able to demonstrate empathy for a tree, for example, because they can, to some degree, assume the tree's perspective. The children's understanding of the potential pain and suffering of a cut-down tree causes them to reject their personal interests and advocate for nonintervention, which leads to a position that is fairly common in the literature on environmental ethics. Gebhard et al. (2003) "propose[d] that the children conceive of trees as a moral object and that anthropomorphizing nature allows it to be moralized" (p. 97). The central theme found in their research is that children argue for the protection of nonhuman life because they acknowledge the concept of life. Children view plants, animals, and trees as being alive and having the right to live. Gebhard et al. concluded that children believe that "nature wants to live, . . . and trees want to live too" (p. 98). The authors made a compelling argument that this form of moralizing is fairly sophisticated and represents the beginning of a biocentric perspective, which is often linked to ecological identity.

Kahn (2003) explained that children's anthropomorphic reasoning can also be accompanied by *isomorphic* and *transmorphic* reasoning. Not only can children identify with the rights of natural entities because of the fact that they are alive (anthropomorphic reasoning), but they can also acknowledge a symmetrical relationship between themselves and the tree (isomorphic reasoning). Transmorphic reasoning is different from anthropomorphic reasoning, in which nature is thought to have human properties, and isomorphic reasoning, in which nature and human are understood as having something in common. Transmorphic reasoning applies a moral feature (such as freedom), which is important to both humans and nature, directly to both. For example, in the case of cutting down trees, children can reason that, like themselves, animals need a home; but when trees are cut down, animals will lose their home, and children consider this wrong. Apparently, when children undergo this reasoning process they recognize a category that includes both humans and trees to which moral value is equally applied.

The process in which children identify and learn from nature encompasses a more reciprocal aspect as well. They learn about themselves not only through identifying similar qualities between themselves and nature, but also by identifying with the unique qualities that they find in nature and then applying it to their own lives. In short, children learn about themselves from what they experience or perhaps witness in nature. Kahn (2002) used the example of death: Children witness death in nature, and it reminds them of their own mortality, which leads to further exploration of themselves. This process is different than that of anthropomorphism because, essentially, children are not determining nature through their own life stance, but, rather, they are using nature to teach them how to experience their own lives.

Kahn (2003) argued that the process of developing an ecological identity is essentially an affective one. He pointed to children's ability to move back and forth between an objective view of nature and one that is more emotionally based. Most important is the idea that children are able to acknowledge the tree's otherness. Kahn described the internal process that children undergo: "I am not that—and yet, just in this one respect, it is like a part of me" (p. 119). Therefore, children are able to experience a continuum between sameness and difference between themselves and the other. In terms of identity formation, Shepard (1996a) depicted this process graphically: "We take in the animal, disgorge part of it, discover who we are and are not" (p. 72). Anthropomorphic, isomorphic, and to a large extent transmorphic reasoning grant the natural world greater independence when we embrace what Shepard referred to as "otherness": the partly unknown and wild aspects of nature that he argued are "essential to the discovery of the true self" (p. 5).

In terms of ecological identity, Khan (2003) addressed the question of whether or not ecological identity is a phenomenon of multiplicity or unity. He suggested that ecological identity with regard to children seems to be both "multiple and unified" (p.130). Vis-à-vis multiplicity, Kahn referred to the many ways in which children relate to their natural environment. In relating to nature, children consider a number of factors, including personal interests, human welfare, aesthetics, teleology, the intrinsic value of nature, and rights and respect for nature. He also pointed out that children have the capacity to embrace and cope with the contradictory and competing claims that come from these different standpoints. In this regard children are able to develop a coherent orientation towards a number of environmental issues. On the question of unity in identity, Kahn pointed out that his research has shown that children from diverse cultures and economic backgrounds appear to engage in remarkably similar environmental moral reasoning. In general, through their interaction with nature, children construct increasingly adequate understandings about themselves and the world around them. He concluded his work by questioning the role of culture in developing an individual's environmental identity. Kahn argued that this role may be overemphasized compared to how children actually interact with nature and develop an understanding of themselves.

The process of identification with nature through anthropomorphizing decreases as children grow older. Kahn (2003) suggested that the decrease in explicit anthropomorphism in adolescence can be attributed to a number of factors: (a) Through their day-to-day experience in the modern world, adolescents learn to identify with a more hierarchical view of "life" that holds that human and animal life are different and that both have more value than plant life; and (b) adolescents may be less inclined to relate to nature in anthropomorphic ways because in this stage of their lives they are more concerned about their identity as it relates to their place in society and their societal identity than are younger children. This dip or timeout in adolescents' interest in nature may also be seen as a result of the adolescent desire for activities that convey excitement, support interaction with their peers, allow for peer acceptance, and establish autonomy. Kaplan and Kaplan (2002) challenged the notion, however, that the change in the way adolescents relate to nature means that they do not appreciate natural places or that nature cannot play an important role in their identity formation. Educator Cynthia Tomashow (2002) asserted that nature can play a very important role in helping adolescents to meet the perilous challenges that they face in identity formation. She presented specific techniques that educators can use to encourage ecological thought and an affiliation with nature to support the learning process in general and identity formation more specifically. Tomashow argued that nature must play a key role in the healthy development of adolescent identity and pointed to the wild nature of the adolescent identity process that encompasses a dramatic need to differentiate, rapid physical changes, powerful sexual impulses, and a desire for intimacy. Tomashow contended that, through their experiences in nature, adolescents can find an ally in nature and a resource that can help them not only to understand their own changes, but also to understand the relationships that they have within the context of their own lives.

A significant amount of literature links children's cognitive development to their relationship to nature. More specifically, there is also growing evidence that suggests that nature is an important source of identity formation for children. In addition, ample evidence supports the notion that children are able to learn about their relational selves in nature and engage in sophisticated moral decision making as a result of this learning. In light of this evidence, there is an emerging concern related to the pervasive destruction of the environment and its impact on childhood ecological identity. Kahn (2002) raised the notion of "environmental generational amnesia" (p. 105 ), which refers to the idea that children take the natural environment that they encounter in their childhood as the norm against which they measure environmental degradation later in life. If this is the case, each generation takes the degraded condition of the environment as its normal experience. Kahn suggested that

> the upside of environmental generation amnesia is that each generation starts afresh, unencumbered mentally by the environmental misdeeds of previous generations, but the downside is enormous, for each of us has difficulty understanding in a direct, experiential way that nature as experienced in childhood is not the norm. (p. xii)

This raises the concern that children's proclivity towards an ecological identity is being thwarted in a way that goes beyond their conscious understanding. In a dramatic way this could be seen as a pervasive and monumental form of identity theft. As natural spaces for children become depleted, the prospect of developing an ecological identity becomes less and less. This raises the troubling notion that as time progresses our chances of developing an ecological identity become diminished, and at the same time our ability to understand ourselves and our capacity to resolve the moral dilemmas that we face become restricted.

## In the Shadows

With regard to our identity and the process of identification with nature, psychoanalyst Nicholsen (2002) eloquently described the prerequisites for identification to occur and the process of identification itself. She paralleled the initial identity experiences between a baby and his/her mother with our identity experiences in nature and referred to the initial identification experience of a young child as one that cannot be captured or represented in speech. Nicholsen explained that the identification experience involves "entering the silence of nature" (p. 22) and a process of "being, not saying" (p. 22), and is one through which a person ultimately moves alone. It is in the silence of nature, Nicholsen suggested, that we find ourselves alone in the presence of another. The young child is able to enter this empty, unformed space because of the security that he/she has gained from the original union with the mother.

Nicholsen (2002) believed that identifying with the nonhuman world encompasses a similar process. Entering into the silence of nature entails a profound experience of being both separate and merged with another. She suggested that it makes no difference whether or not this merging is an expansion of the self or a loss of the self, that it is both. In Nicholsen's words, "In essence this merging takes us into the direct presence of self and other—we experience the other from the inside of life as such" (p. 23). She described the silence of nature by using the Buddhist term of the *void*, from where all life (10,000 things) emerges. All life emerges from the silence of nature, and when we identify or merge with another in this silence (where form and space meet), we experience the void as life and livingness itself. "While retaining an awareness of difference, we experience and become one with the life that unites all things" (p. 24). To endure this process Nicholsen proposed that we must be able to enter the silence of nature with a strong enough sense of self so that it will not desert us in the silence and will be there as we return to a more integrated state.

Our identification with nature, however, does not come without cost. Within the identification process is the potential for suffering because, when we identify with the other in such a profound way, we open up ourselves to the psychic trauma of facing the destruction or loss of the other. This initiates an unconscious struggle that, in psychoanalytic terms, is at the core of our ambivalent and seemingly irrational relationship with nature. Psychoanalyst Harold Searles (1960) is often credited with initially addressing the relationship between the unconscious and the environmental crisis that we face today: "My hypothesis is that man is hampered in his meeting of this environmental crisis by a severe and pervasive apathy which is based largely upon feelings and attitudes of which he is unconscious" (p. 228). Searles pointed out that both our apathy in addressing the environmental crisis and our irrational behavior that has precipitated this crisis are a reflection of a deep inner conflict between our internal unconscious processes and the external world. Our feelings of deep fear, guilt, and shame about what we see happening to the natural environment are deeply repressed in our unconscious. The threat of environmental destruction plays itself out in our internal processes as a psychic tug of war between our separateness on the one hand and our continuity with the nonhuman on the other. It is these internal conflicts, Searles suggested, that prevent humans from addressing their destructive behavior in relation to the environment.

Searles (1960) argued that in the early stages of their lives, humans are not differentiated from the nonhuman; nor is the organic from the inorganic. As we grow and develop, part of our psychic development is to differentiate our subjective selves from the nonhuman. Searles emphasized that this is not an easy task and one that is saturated with feelings of vulnerability because of the struggle of coming to terms with issues of separateness and the permanent uncertainty associated with it. The unconscious processes that he described involve a painful process of recognizing our limitations and mortality. More specifically, he revealed the drama that takes place at an unconscious level. We deny our relatedness to the nonhuman because we fear sinking back into a lack of differentiation, but at the same time we long to ease the pain of separateness. It is this internal battle and the resulting ambivalence that are so difficult to cope with. Searles suggested that we avoid addressing this conflict through either a pervasive apathy or identification with technology and the accompanying illusion of omnipotence that comes with it. In his view, we irrationally engage in destructive acts towards the environment as a testament to our fantasy of omnipotence. We destroy the world to compensate for our unconscious feelings of fear, shame, and guilt about the destruction of the environment, thereby engaging in a vicious cycle in which no one (human or nonhuman) gains.

The part of the unconscious that represents these inner turmoils that we face (but are afraid to admit) is often termed the "personal shadow" (Zweig & Abrams, 1991, p. xvi) part of our personalities. Not only the inner conflicts between our internal psychic selves are found in the unconscious, but also the negative (or some may say evil) emotions that our society tends to avoid and deny. This tendency to deny these inner feelings represents a choice that an individual is forced to make between the expectations of a culture that abhors these "uncivilized" emotions and the part in each and every one of us where hate, anger, and fear reside. In regard to identification and the process of developing an identity, we develop a partial identity because we identify with only part of ourselves—the part that is most accepted by culture, or what Zweig and Abrams aptly described as the "news year's resolution" (p. xvi) part of ourselves. Bly (1988) pointed out, however, that this "bag" full of denied emotion cannot be closed permanently and spills out when we encounter another during difficult and stressful times in our lives. Our inability to acknowledge these feelings fuels the possibility of their coming out in inappropriate and destructive ways towards both the human and nonhuman environment. Bly called these emotions the wild part of ourselves and suggested that by not embracing them we not only risk the possibility of their revealing themselves in destructive ways, but also lose a key source of vitality and creativity in our lives.

Drengson (1991) suggested that our identification with nature can be problematic as a result of early traumatic experiences in childhood and that the Western parenting style based on domination and the withholding of love, validation, and self-esteem causes irreparable harm to children. Because we have not addressed our own shadow feelings, we are unable to deal with or accept them in our children. Consequently, we engage in parenting behaviors that work against the child's basic nature. This leads to hurt and distress, which are repressed in the unconscious.

In regard to our relationship to nature, Drengson (1991) suggested that being raised in an environment that allows for a well-integrated personal identity develops a secure base. If this is the case, it is easier to extend our care outward to both the human and nonhuman world. However, if we have been raised in a manner that does not allow for an integrated sense of self, our relationship and, in particular, the way that we identify with nature may indeed be pathological. Using Fox's (1990) typology of the levels of identification (personal, ontological, cosmological), Drengson argued that humans can identify with all three levels in pathological ways. On a personal level, if we project our negative or denied aspect of the self onto others, we may see them as a threat and engage them in an oppositional way. This could lead to manipulative and controlling behavior, which could easily lead to destructive behavior. Ontological identification, which encompasses identification with the "presence of all others" (p. 135), can also become problematic. Drengson described ontological pathological identification clearly:

> If there is a lot of uneaten shadow, the risk is that the manifest presence of all others could be seen as threatening and unsettling, and then "going with the flow" and staying in the present could become a form of subjective cosmic psychology. Or, one might avoid handling these negative elements by identifying with the state of blissful presence, . . . and one will not appreciate the unique circumstances one is, and will not be able to understand what must be done now to change our destructive, maladaptive culture. (p. 136)

Finally, in regard to cosmological identification Drengson (1991) raised the concern that there is the potential, under the influence of the shadow, to move into abstraction and reification so that one treats the cosmological story as a depersonalized theory. "One identifies with the story, but not the unique beings with whom life is shared" (p. 136).

Gottschalk (2001) suggested that one critical path towards an ecological identity involves more directly linking the unconscious with the natural world. He referred to the work of ecopsychologist and historian Theodore Rozak as a prime example of how this can occur. Rozak (1995) believed that humans need to acknowledge what our ancestors accepted as common knowledge: that there is more to know about the self, or, perhaps more correctly, more *self* to know, than personal history suggests. Although our personal and social identities are important, Rozak advised that we not deny our greater universal identity. He described the core of the mind as the ecological unconscious, the contents of which represent in many ways the living record of cosmic evolution, tracing back to the origins of time. Rozak (1993) depicted a clear link between the unconscious and the natural world and described how they have co-evolved: "The ordered complexity of nature tell us that life and mind emerge from this evolutionary tale as culminating natural systems within the unfolding sequence of physical, biological, mental, and cultural systems we know as the universe" (p. 49). Rozak argued that the ecological unconscious is an inherent part of all of us, and the repression and denial of this part of our selves is the deepest root of madness in Western industrial society. Living with the understanding of the deep bond between psyche and nature, in Rozak's view, leads to a particular understanding that encompasses the notion of the dialectical relationship between planetary and personal well being. An ecological identity can emerge if we are able to revive this inherent but repressed sense of environmental reciprocity. In many ways the ecological self that Rozak identified involves a deconstruction of the externality of nature and leads to an expansive identification of a larger, interconnected self. This is a challenging endeavor because it takes place within a modernist technocratic society that represses the ecological unconscious. We lose touch with ourselves in a way that limits our ability to address the very critical environmental and social challenges that we face today. Paul Sheppard stated:

> An ecologically harmonious sense of self and the world is not the outcome of rational choices. It is the inherent possession of everyone; it is latent in the organism, in the interaction of the genome and early experience . . . . Beneath the veneer of civilization, in the trite phrase of humanism, lies not the barbarian and

> the animal, but the human in us who knows what is right and necessary for becoming fully human . . . . We have not lost, and cannot lose the genuine impulse. It awaits only an authentic expression. (pp. 39-40)

### Relation to the Other

Rather than linking ecological identity directly with the psychological process of identification, Weigert (1997) relied upon symbolic interaction theory and drew upon the concept of a *generalized environmental other*. He proposed that if our identity develops through interactions with others, then a central blind spot of much of the symbolic interactionist work on identity has been restricting this other to an anthropocentric (human-centered) dimension. This generalized environmental other is expanded to the environment and the natural world at large. Following the same logic as the generalized other, the "voice" of this environment is incorporated into the repertoire of "other" that we now "naturally" initiate as we mentally rehearse actions and anticipate response from an environment that is both human and not.

Weigert (1997) suggested that we expand our traditional understanding of symbolic interaction to reach a new perspective that he called *transverse interaction*. He argued that this perspective

> underlines the importance of grounding intentional and interactional meanings of the social life process in the natural meanings generated within the physical world. Contemporary selves and societies need to see their actions within the natural meanings in sustainable ways . . . . For the first time in history, modern selves are self consciously aware of the need to analyze their actions as transverse interaction within the world that is there for all humans . . . . Whatever else we think we are doing, we necessarily affect the environment. (pp. 159-160)

In relation to the concepts of generalized environmental other and transverse interaction, Weigert (1997) made an important point about not only our individual behavior, but also our social interactions. He believed that an environmental identity of this nature is "based on the realization that the meaning of social action is primarily environmental and universal, and secondarily social . . . . Individual actions have social outcomes and environmental effects" (p. 161). In addition, Weigert explained that an environmental identity allows an individual to integrate both an organic and a physical view of the world that leads to a particular way of "experiencing self, perceiving others, seeing the world, and motivating action" (p. 170).

Weigert's (1997) work is helpful in that he developed a clear link between humans and the natural world around them. He presented the important notion that humans have the capacity to communicate with their environment, and he emphasized the role that language plays in helping to assimilate the idea that we are indeed in a two-way relationship with our environment: "The way we talk about environment reflects the way we see it. And the way we see and talk about it shapes the way we think and feel about our relationship to it" (p. 188). The strength of Weigert's work is that he strongly advised that humans actually listen to nature, which, in turn, compels us to ask, not what do we want from nature, but what does nature want from us?

## The Question of Ontology

In his article "What Is Ecological Identity?" Andrew Light (2000) argued that the concept of ecological identity has not been clearly defined. He suggested that there are still many political, philosophical, and practical issues that need to be addressed before we can effectively use this term in our day-to-day language. Light stated that if environmentalists are not able to interpret environmentalism as a form of identity politics on par with feminism, race-based politics, or sexual orientation, they risk having ecological identity defined for them from the outside:

> Unless one holds a radical view of human ontology as indistinguishable from nature, there is a gap built into the idea of an ecological identity not found in some other forms of identity politics: the gap between the subjectivity of the politicised identity trait of the individual, and the object of the politics of that identity. (p. 62)

Light (2000) stressed that the question of ontology is important and must be addressed if an ecological identity perspective is to be successful in the arena of identity politics. In his view there are generally two ontological assumptions that one could make with respect to a person's relationship to nature. An *attached* identity involves the claim to a deep connection with nature to the extent that it becomes part of one's identity. A *detached* identity, on the other hand, involves a particular empathy towards nature that does not necessarily become part of one's identity. Light believed that these views have different "constitutive profiles" (p. 60) that imply unique characteristics and different views of what should or should not be done about the social and environmental challenges that we face today. Although he did not specify which ontological position he favored, Light emphasized that it is critical that both ontological positions be clearly defined to determine their potential strengths and limitations. "Providing a more thorough description of a particular ecological identity ensures that part of the movement will have a coherent basis" (p. 68).

Although he did not use the same terminology as Light did, Snauwaert (1995) used similar categories to show that both detached and attached forms of ontology play an important role in moral development as it relates to the environment. From Snauwaert's perspective, a detached view offers an impartiality or distance that helps to develop a sense of justice towards the environment. The attached view, however, offers an ontology of connection that leads more to an ethic of care and compassion.

Snauwaert's principal argument is that these perspectives complement each other and originate within our identification with nature: "We are individuated even though interconnected, and our individuated status demands that we respect interpersonal boundaries, thus it can be argued that both justice and care are necessary and complementary dimensions of morality" (p. 4).

Williams (1995), on the other hand, challenged both Snauwaert's (1995) and Light's (2000) ontological assumptions as they relate to ecological identity. He believed that their conceptions of our relationship with nature are problematic in that both approaches involve a process of determining nature as "out there" and involve a process of moving outwards toward *it*:

> Ecological identity, however, is not about the prioritizing of the self to include the earth, nor is it about expansion of one's identity; ecological identification is about the *derivation* of the self from the network of relationships that include the biotic. (p. 2)

This argument is contrary to the Western notion of our relationship with nature in that the self is seen as existing only within the primacy of relationship and not the other way around.

Naess (1987) made a similar point: "There is nothing in isolation, no thing in itself. An intrinsic relation between two things A and B, so that without the relation, A and B are no longer the same things" (p. 265). Naess disagreed with the image of "man in environment" and favored the relational, total field image. This is an ontological shift in that it discredits the notion of an individual's being either detached or separate from his or her environment. The ecosystem is not "out there" as an extension of our identity; rather, the ecosystem is one of which humans are a part; our identity is interwoven with the identity of the ecosystem. A conception of the "self" as constituted and defined by such a relationship is different from a conception of "self" as atomistic and individualistic.

Naess's (1995) ontological views are based upon a primary concept in Buddhist philosophy entitled *co-dependent arising*. A fundamental view in Buddhist philosophy is that everything is interdependent and relative. Our world is characterized as an infinitely repeated interrelationship with all members of the cosmos. This relationship is said to be simultaneously mutual identity and mutual intercausality. Interdependence, also understood as dependent co-origination or mutual causality, leads to the idea of mutual identity, in which parts are identical to the whole insofar as the whole could not exist without all of its causes (Peterson, 2001, p. 84).

## Gender Critique

The ecofeminist critique of deep ecology questions the notion that an ecological identity can be determined through similarity. Plumwood (2000) argued that this notion is highly problematic and is suspect of maintaining and supporting the very individual and institutional practices that destroy and oppress nature. In Plumwood's view, an ethical stance based on a similarity that grants rights to nonhuman nature because "their interests are the same as our interests" results in a form of moral extensionism that is highly problematic. More specifically, this stance is anthropocentric at its very core and represents a "one place" (p. 65) perspective that eliminates any form of communication between ourselves and nature. It does this by obliterating the notion of otherness by emphasizing sameness (nature and I are the same) and denying the reality of difference. Plumwood argued that this form of ethics, based upon what she described as "unity of interests" (p. 66), is liable to hegemonic interpretations and, in fact, sets the tone for behavior that oppresses others by denying the voice and needs of others:

> One of the main difficulties with interpreting solidarity in terms of vaguely specified concepts of unity is that this interpretation does not theoretically rule out some possibilities . . . . Oppressive projects of unity abound in the human case, especially in the case of hegemonic relationships of colonization. (p. 66)

In regard to ecological identity, Plumwood argued that the unity with self (one with nature) lends itself to absorb, assimilate, and recreate the other (nature) in a way that ontologically destroys it.

To address the narrow stance of an identity based on similarity, Plumwood (2000) advocated a stance that acknowledges the idea of difference. She did not deny the idea of similarity, but suggested that our identity must be seen as arising within a continuum of sameness and difference. In this regard Plumwood suggested that a relational stance with nature would better be served by the notion of solidarity rather than unity. A position of solidarity questions the notion of an ecological identity based on similarity and calls for an identity that originates from our difference from nature:

> We must attain solidarity with the other, *in their difference*, and despite the ambiguity of the term "identification," solidarity here cannot be interpreted as identity: solidarity and respect cannot be understood as processes of overcoming or eliminating otherness or difference. (p. 63)

Recognizing difference allows for a relationship between the self and nature, but also allows the trees, animals, and so on with which we live to be separate in their own right. Recognizing this persistent otherness sets the condition for the freedom of an identity of both self and other. In an overall sense, recognizing our difference from nature allows us to respond to nature as an ally and not as an oppressor.

Plumwood (2000) described an identity based on a recognition of difference as a *traitorous* identity that is built on both an emotional and an intellectual grasp of the "parallels in the logic of the One and the Other" (p. 68). A person who maintains a traitorous identity is able to acknowledge being both the oppressor and the oppressed within the larger social order. A traitorous identity is build on a revised conception of the self based on its similarity to nature as much as a critical stance towards the oppressing group in which one exists. An individual with a traitorous identity opposes oppressive practices and attempts to relinquish and critique the dominant beliefs that accompany these practices. In Plumwood's view, a traitorous identity is not easy to come by and involves difficult self-reflection in which one's own oppressive stance is acknowledged and at the same time the pain of oppressed others is recognized. A person with a traitorous identity is someone who understands the workings of his/her own oppressor groups and is a witness to how these inner workings oppress Others. The traitorous identity has a view from both sides and allows a person to situate him-/herself from the perspective of the One and the life of the Other. As Plumwood stated:

> Being a human who takes responsibility for your own interspecies' location in this way requires avoiding both the arrogance of reading your own location and perspective as that of the other, and the arrogance of assuming you can "read the Other," know their lives as they do, and in that sense speak for the other. (p. 69)

The ethics that emerge from a traitorous identity originate from a different ontological stance from that of an ecological identity proposed by deep ecology. A traitorous identity based on difference politicizes our relationship with nature by emphasizing difference, not similarity. In this circumstance we are forced to understand ourselves as actors in an oppressive social order and called upon to thwart and challenge "oppressive ideologies of domination and self imposition which have formed our conceptions of both the other and ourselves" (p. 69). In this regard, Plumwood (2000) suggested that humans need to listen and be more attentive to nature and that our relationship with nature should be considered more as an invitation to an open future than as a predetermined event foreclosed by a narrow understanding of what identity means.

Perhaps the most provocative ecofeminist stance related to ecological identity is the view that Donna Haraway (1991) proposed. Grassie (1996) described Haraway as a science historian with a feminist perspective deeply influenced by postmodern thought. Haraway was critical of any totalizing view of identity but, in particular, any identity theorizing based upon the assumption of a human-nature dualism. In Haraway's view, assumptions that divide humans and nature (along with many other binaries) are saturated with beliefs, values, and ontological assumptions that support and maintain privilege. This privilege is secured mostly by wealthy individuals (predominantly men) and those who use science as a definitive source for determining reality. The debilitating binaries of culture-nature, science-technology, and, organic-inorganic, according to Haraway, are human constructions deeply entrenched in the human psyche. This binary construction is embedded in a Western discourse imbued with scientific, objectivist, and positivist logic. Haraway averred that the challenge to overcome this ontological fragmentation, especially as it relates to identity, is to construct other ways of thinking and talking about nondual existence.

The path that Haraway (1991) chose to overcome the crippling effects of dualistic thinking is indeed thought provoking. She began by deconstructing the core binaries that limit our identity as human beings and casting a critical eye on the human-animal binary, and persuasively argued that the border between animals and humans has already been transgressed in a myriad of ways:

> Biological and evolutionary theory over the past two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science. (p. 152)

In this regard the development of transgenic organisms, the idea of genetic integrity/unity of the organism, is called into question.

The next boundary that Haraway (1991) disputed is the border between organism and machine. She pointed out that household machines are becoming more lifelike and are taking on personalities; in addition, humans couple with machines for medical purposes. Pacemakers, dialysis machines, artificial limbs and joints, and hearing aids are all examples of the boundary breakdown between organism and machine.

The third binary that Haraway (1991) challenged is the binary that connotes a separation between the organic and inorganic: "Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum . . . . People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque." (p. 153). Haraway noted that today's machines carry almost infinite information on a tiny chip hidden behind an attractive façade. This ethereal invisibility renders machines potent weapons: "They are as hard to see politically as materially. They are about consciousness—or its simulation" (p. 153). In an overall sense, Haraway attempted to expose and deconstruct problematic binaries because they do not represent the context in which we live and, as a result, lead to a problematic (especially for women) understanding of identity. An identity based on a separation from nature, in Haraway's view, is unsustainable and limits the range of political action that is required to initiate social change.

In terms of identity and her attempts to overcome false binaries, Haraway (1991) offered a challenging alternative. Central to the myth that she created—what she described as "an ironic political myth" (p. 149)—is the image of the Cyborg, which is "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (p. 149). Haraway's concept of Cyborg is a rejection of rigid boundaries; notably, those that separate humans from animals and humans from machine. She critiqued the false organic self that some theorists use as a basis for an identity that has a particular affinity with nature. Haraway was deeply critical of an imagined organic ontology because it is based upon what she saw as uninformed technophobia. In Haraway's view, there is no such a thing as a "natural" self. Cyborg identity not only attempts to transgress boundaries between humans, animals, and machines, but also calls into question any identity that refers to nature as an independent phenomenon. Identity arises from each individual's unique circumstances, and therefore any unity (between people) in terms of identity is unfounded. There is no pretense to unity; in fact, such aspirations are considered myopic and dangerous because they restrict and oppress diversity and difference. As Haraway stated, "Single vision produces worse illusions that double vision or many-headed monsters" (p. 154).

Haraway's (1991) account of the human Cyborg as representing both the myth and the reality of human identity yields a potentially fruitful discourse. Because the Cyborg does not exist as nature *or* culture, but rather as a hybrid of both, it is not limited by traditional binaries and dualistic paradigms. To engage in a more effective discourse related to identity, we must first acknowledge the pervasive role that technology, science, and machines play in our lives. The Cyborg myth challenges us to overcome our dualistic tendencies by reintroducing questions of religion, philosophy, and morality into the culture/nature/science–identity debate. It does this by setting the stage for a way of thinking about human identity that places responsibility squarely back into our own hands. We cannot hide from what we have created; we can only begin to discuss and negotiate what role we want science, technology, and machines to play in our lives. The multiple-identities perspective, rather than the unity-of-identity perspective that Haraway envisioned, also creates a unique understanding of community. Each individual is required to overcome a particular innocence related to the denial of the role that technology, machines, language, and so on play in our lives. This also requires a stance that is highly suspicious of any dualistic version of what Haraway described as *natureculture*. She called upon us to bear witness to the fact that dualistic thought (any attempt that separates humans from the rest of the world) has ethical implications because in practice it favors those are most privileged in our society.

Using a slightly different analysis, Polk (1999) supported queer theory as a basis to analyze the development of ecological identity. He argued that the "production" of human identity interconnects with the production of nonhuman identities and that these interconnections need to be understood if human identity is to be ecologically literate and socially just:

> Queer theory attempts to formulate a conceptual framework that overturns a longstanding tradition of dualistic, oppositional, value hierarchical logics that impact upon both human and non human bodies. These logics have thoroughly integrated themselves into the textual narrative of what is means to be a legitimate western patriarchal subject. (p. 2)

In this regard Polk explained that queer theory attempts to deconstruct these logics to set the stage for developing alternative identities that are socially nonoppressive and ecologically just.

The challenge as Polk (1999) understood it is to address the cultural narratives that have been dependent on historically contingent and culturally specific concepts of nature. Our narratives are "an archaic self-replicating system . . . that secures a place of privilege for a single identity, a singular autonomous subject, which traditionally, we all know, is that of the straight, white, able-bodied, property owning male" (pp. 5-6). Thus identities are defined through ideological systems that exist among those who have the power to enact the "preferred" identification and then enforce compliance and punish difference. At its very core, this involves a process of subjugation and marginalization that determines who "belongs" to nature and who does not:

> This is about nature's content, it touches not only on what is allowed to belong to nature and why, but also on who is allowed to participate in nature and what happens to those parts and beings excluded from nature. In other words, this is the question of survival and destruction. (Lease, 1995, p. 12)

Polk (1999) criticized any type of ecological identity that maintains the status quo and marginalizes a "body" that does not fit with the dominant ideology that sustains a patriarchal/heterosexual view of both sex and the world. He asserted that the narratives of our times both denaturalize and dehumanize all bodies whose erotic desire and expression do not conform with the norms of procreation. To challenge the status quo, Polk suggested that a radical change is required in the symbolic order that we call language and that different interpretations of human identity are possible, but that we must challenge the metaphors that underpin our thinking. Regarding the symbolic order, we must move from the predator-hunter metaphor that underpins our worldview and supports the domination of a few. Polk offered a vision of an ecological identity that he hoped would readjust the way that "corporeal bodies" relate in the world:

> I imagine a queer ecological identity theory to be a theory that refused the disjunctive-value-hierarchical logic of the human/animal binary. It rejects an insistence of oneness (human), sameness (straight-white-male) and domination (animal-female). It refuses the corresponding justification of human-straight-white male privilege. It is an anti-essentialist, anti-patriarchal, anti-modern theory that expands the field of identity to include what the old tradition abhors: the relational body, the body in mutual, interactive alliance with others, both human and non human. (p. 13)

## Conceptualizing Ecological Identity

Responding to what Plumwood (2000) considers as the invitation of nature (p. 70) presents an opportunity to ask deeper questions about ourselves. In a theoretical sense, identifying with the more-than-human world poses questions of ontology, ethics, and relationship. An exploration of ecological identity is a political endeavor as well because it takes place in a world where various identities are linked to a particular value, and as a result identity becomes a potential sight of oppression and/or exploitation. The endeavor to develop an ecological identity is also an affective process. Intense emotions of fear, love, and vulnerability accompany the identification process and touch humans at the deepest recesses of their being. In a sense, an ecological identity represents a process of moving out to meet the world by humbly *receiving* what the natural world offers. This is contrary to the Cartesian notion that humans are the centre of things and predetermine the world. It suggests that animals, ecosystems, and other life forms not only nourish us physically, but also have something to teach us about ourselves and our place in the world.

Responding to nature's invitation requires a particular imagination, one that is able to perceive nature not as "brute matter" (Griffiths, 2002, p. 269), but as a highly interrelated, multilayered phenomenon that encompasses not only form and substance, but also space, time, and energy. Beyond language and our attempts to theorize what nature means lies what Nicholsen (2002) described as the "silence of nature" (p. 19). In a seemingly contradictory way, nature speaks to us in silence. This silence is not neutral and encompasses a message that, given the right conditions, can be responded to. Humility, openness, courage, trust, and patience are characteristics necessary to respond to this silence. What emerges from it is life itself. Where space, form, time, and energy converge, life reveals itself, and the beginning of an ecological identity is made possible.

Responding to nature's invitation can lead to a path that complicates essentialist views related to the concepts of self, identity, and subjectivity. Developing an ecological identity entails an expansion of self that tests the limits of our understanding by seriously questioning the existence of an isolated, autonomous self. A foray into nature can lead to the dissolution of self through a process of identification with a greater Self, one that encompasses all others. The self can also be understood as being maintained and supported through a myriad of relationships and not just as a stand-alone phenomena. The concept of identity is also destabilized because of its etymological roots that suggest that identity is based on sameness. This connection is challenged because it denies the opportunity of building or establishing a relationship with nature based upon difference. Our own subjectivity becomes suspect as well because, as the notion of self becomes diminished and the idea of identity based on similarity is criticized, the question that Sandilands (1995) quite correctly asked emerges: "Who is this subject who speaks for, on behalf of, or *as* nature?" (p. 77).

Destabilizing the identity, self, and subject triad also raises important questions related to ontology and ethics. Naess's (1989a) ontology-before-ethics stance has been criticized for its understanding of an ecological identity based on sameness, and it is described as not only anthropocentric, but also andropocentric. The ethical stance arising from the ontology that urges protecting nature on the basis of enlightened self-interest also seems vulnerable to similar criticism. Basing our relationship with nature on difference and an ethical stance of solidarity is also problematic, however, because it lacks any notion of commonality; that is, we all dwell on the earth. This ontological and related ethics debate implies that perhaps the most congruent ethical stance is somewhere in between these stances. This in-between approach suggests that, ontologically, humans find themselves *amongst* or in *association* with all Others. In this regard ethics arise not from similarity or difference, but from a sense of place—which makes room for both of these stances. This is similar to Evernden's (1985) notion of the "field of care" (p. 43) that arises from direct experience, perception, and intuition as much as it does from a preconceived, reasoned approach. In this regard ethics are not predetermined on premises of difference or sameness, but emerge within a relational field between humans and the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996). Wilber's (1979) critique of ecological theory in general is that it is essentially dualistic because it cannot comprehend an identity that is based on both sameness and difference. In Wilber's view, this dualistic antagonism stifles the development of an ecological conscious and the corresponding ecological identity by engaging in polarized debate that fails to capture a more holistic understanding of our place in the world.

Many of the perspectives related to ecological identity suggest that identity cannot be understood as a stand-alone phenomenon. That is, empirically, it is impossible to develop a static representation of what identity means because not only is it a dynamic, ever-emerging phenomenon (Ashmore & Jussin, 1997; Maalouf, 2000; Sarup, 1996), but it is also contingent on a host of other emergent factors. Deep ecologists have linked identity to the process of identification and similarity, whereas others have pointed to the role that language plays in limiting or enhancing our ecological selves (Lease, 1995; Polk, 1999). Other writers have suggested that identity cannot be determined through a relationship with a fictitious "nature," but only through the social groups to which one belongs (Sandilands, 1995). Eastern metaphysics related to Buddhism, on the other hand, envisions identity as emerging, not on its own, but rather within a myriad of other "identities" (human, nonhuman, and even cosmological).

In the preceding overview of the literature on ecological identity, it is apparent that there is no clear, unified view of the meaning of this concept. Ecological identity is named differently by different writers. Although some have referred to it as *ecological identity* (Tomashow, 1995), others have used alternate titles such as *ecocentric identity* (Bretherton, 2003) and *mutual identity* (Petersen, 2001). Each different name represents a different view of what it means to integrate our understanding of identity with the greater-than-human world. A closer look, however, reveals a number of similar themes that are worth noting. Although it may seem obvious, it is important to point out that all writers have concurred that the Western notion of identity is problematic. There has also been general agreement that any determination of ourselves as ecological beings, first and foremost, is a radical activity in that it challenges the dominant worldview.

Donald Michael (1999) suggested that our desperate attempt to understand the world in its entirety for the purpose of "fixing" things is not only arrogant, but also unfounded. He maintained that knowing the world, once and for all, is an impossible task that leads us down paths that are not particularly useful (e.g., our infatuation and dependence on technology). He brought us back, not to the science of ecology, but to the experience of ecology and what he called the key ecological premise that "everything is connected to everything" (p. 248). In this regard he asserted that how we "walk" in the world, how we treat others, and how we behave towards the environment are profoundly ecological and correspondingly ethical endeavors. Although we will never fully grasp our place in the world, Michael believed that we can still behave in ways that are ecologically and morally responsible.

Ecological identity could be seen as a complex topic. Its complexity and the difficulty related to understanding it, however, should not be confused with our ability to experience ourselves as ecological beings. The literature on ecological identity has a central theme of drawing us back to our direct experience of the more-than-human world. (Fisher, 2002; Macy, 1994) The idea that our bodies are the intermediary point between ourselves and nature has a long tradition. Dilthey (as cited in Fisher, 2002) argued that "life cannot be brought to the bar of reason . . . . To get close to the things that matter we have no recourse but to our bodily experience" (p. 53). Some years later Merleau-Ponty (as cited in Fisher, 2002) expressed a similar sentiment: "We have access to nature through the 'vital relation' we have with a privileged part of nature: namely, our body" (p. 127).

Our bodies are in a continuous relationship with the environment. From this nonstop interaction between the environment and our body, experience is born, but how we interpret these experiences becomes a central concern. The ecological identity discourse suggests that our experiences and how we interpret them are limited only if we bring them to the "bar of reason." Reason may help us to explain nature in a particular way, but it is limited in how it helps us to understand ourselves as relational beings. We must also rely upon our perception, intuition, and imagination to encompass what it means to live in a shared world. As jagodzinski (1992) pointed out, "Our break with nature has dehumanized us, alienated us from her because we have overlooked the body and elevated the mind" (p. 180). It is our bodies, jagodzinski argued, that allow us to experience mass, space, texture, color, and line and how they intersect at a place where no boundary exists.

If we are unconstrained by the Western notion of objectivity and cognitive determinism, we can listen to our bodies in a way that allows us the opportunity to find our place in the "household." In an etymological sense the word *place* means (amongst other things) a "space where people dwell" (Onions, 1996). The experience of place is therefore an important part of the experience of having an ecological identity. There are limitations to this, however, because, as we know too well, the connection to place can easily lead to conflict with those from other places. It can also lead to a potential disregard for how behavior in one place may affect those in other places.

Identification with a particular place or even a "wider" cosmological identification with the world is an important starting point. However, we are not drawn into any place unless we understand ourselves as highly relational beings. Any space, natural or manmade, is not a static phenomenon, but rather a dynamic system of mutually interdependent entities. The air we breathe, the soil on which we stand, and the sun shining down on us are all parts of a complex system of which we are a part. Without this dynamic interplay of relationships, the notion of place does not exist, and an absence of relationship implies a vacuum. Our identity as ecological beings therefore originates not within our own skin-encapsulated "selves," but within a complex, multilayered, highly relational realm we call the world.

The human psyche is not exempt from this highly relational realm. Just as any socially constructed rendition of "self" would not exist without the sustenance offered by the sun, plants, animals, and air we breathe, neither would our conscious abilities. As Rozak (1995) has pointed out, not only the human body, but also human consciousness have co-evolved over time with the great unfolding of the earth. In Rozak's view, human consciousness and the world of trees, plants, air, and soil are inseparable. In this regard any healing efforts that are based on the notion of an independent self or autonomous psyche are bound to fail. The preoccupation of fixing "individuals" based on this narrow few of identity focuses upon symptoms rather than causes. Pain is seen as a symptom of personal pathology rather than as a goal to political action to bring about social change. Hillman (1993) blamed a great deal of the social and environmental problems that we face on the fact that the people who should be out in the world changing things are in therapy instead. He argued persuasively against the role of therapists in our lives by suggesting that they create patients rather than citizens.

With regard to therapy and addressing individual pain John Seed (1988) stated:

> The reason why psychology is sterile and therapy doesn't work is that the "self" that psychology describes and purports to heal doesn't exist. It is a social fiction.

> In reality the human personality exists at the intersection of the ancient cycles of air and water and soil. Without these there IS not self; . . . only actual beings, natural beings, can be healed by life flowing thru them; social fictions can't. (p. 4)

Seed suggested that when we begin to identify with nature and to acknowledge our connectedness with the air, water, and soil around us, we begin to create the conditions for spontaneous healing. Identifying with these elements is so crucial in Seed's eyes because the psyche itself evolves from them. He questioned the vast amounts of energies that go into what he described as futile attempts to heal a fictitious self while at the same time our ecological selves suffocate. He encouraged his readers to understand life as a tree and the myriad of human selves as leaves on this tree. The sap of the tree flows through each leaf just as water, air, and soil flow through our bodies and connect us to all life.

In a political sense, the world that we create also has an impact on whether or not ecological identity is allowed to emerge. Bretherton (2003) cautioned that the chance of an ecological identity taking hold is minimal if we do not address the inequitable operations of our social systems. In her words, "While the power relations which underpin the operation of inequitable social systems remain unquestioned and unaddressed, an ecocentric identification is unlikely to be attainable" (p. 4). This is similar to Bookchin's (1980) view that our social, cultural, and political institutions play an instrumental role in allowing an ecological identity to emerge. Both Bretherton and Bookchin strongly proposed that this is the rallying point for political action because social justice and the emergence of an ecological identity are inextricably linked.

This is an important point because it suggests that the social malaise and ecological crisis today are deeply interconnected, based on the premise that if we are not emotionally, physically, and spiritually connected to the earth, we will be hampered in how we live our lives. It also implies that the social, political, and economic institutions that we create can have either a positive or a deleterious impact on our ability to evolve as ecological beings. In many respects this also indicates that our identity as ecological beings emerges in the "place" where the social and bio spheres overlap. Dale (2001) described these spheres as *holons* (parts of a whole), where each *holon* has a reciprocal relationship with the other.

Macy (1994) argued that an ecological identity involves a choice that each of us has the opportunity to make, but it is not an easy choice because in large part it compels us to challenge the social and political status quo. According to Bretherton (2003), "Ecocentrism challenges the organizing principles of social, political and economic life as well as the value systems which sustain them" (p. 3). Choosing an ecological identity does not mean that other identities are usurped, lost, or overcome; it does mean, however, that any political, personal, or social action we take revolves around the belief that we are ecological beings and must live accordingly.

Smith (1999a) believed that a change or transformation in identity initially involves a sense of losing oneself. In our discussion of ecological identity, this certainly seems to be the case. As we let go of our understanding of ourselves as autonomous, independent beings, we emerge only to find ourselves standing on "sacred ground" (Snyder, 1990, p. 94) . We find ourselves in a shared world of relationship where our identity co-emerges within a myriad of other "identities" (human and nonhuman). In this regard, how we walk upon this earth is inseparable from our understanding of ourselves as ecological beings. How we identify ourselves and how we act are different sides of the same coin, which, of course, has implications for how we live out both our personal and our professional lives.

# CHAPTER 3:

# INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY

## Walking With Bees

> I hadn't been out to the hives before, so to start off she gave me a lesson in what she called "bee yard etiquette." She reminded me that the world was really one big bee yard, and the same rules worked fine in both places: Still, don't be an idiot; wear long sleeves and long pants. Don't swat. Don't even think of swatting. If you feel angry, whistle. Anger agitates, while whistling melts a bee's temper. Act like you know what you're doing, even if you don't. Above all send the bees love. Every little thing needs to be loved. (Monk-Kidd, 2002, p. 91)

To foster a discussion related to how I hope to conduct my research, I would like to begin by referring to the above quotation. August, a central character in Sue Monk-Kidd's novel, made this statement to a young woman (Lily) who had experienced years of physical and emotional abuse. August shared this wisdom with Lily while they were standing amongst the bees that August tended. While reading this passage, I was drawn into the text and was compelled to ask more about what August meant. I was interested in her metaphor and was struck by how it related to my own exploration of what it means to have an ecological identity. August demonstrated an understanding of herself as being part of a dynamic universe. She acknowledged that although we might not entirely understand everything that is going on around us, there is still a particular code (etiquette) to be followed. She urged Lily to love "every little thing" (p. 92) and cautioned her to behave in a way that was guided by the space and place in which she was living. As time progressed, Lily found her relationship with August and the immediate surrounding of her farm an essential source of or her own healing and eventual happiness.

Even though August is a fictional character, I have many questions that I would like to ask her: How did she come to such an understanding? How did she carry this understanding forward in her own life? What is her relationship with Lily, and what role does she play in Lily's life? A study of the particular language that August used would also be interesting. For example, she used the word *etiquette*. A quick etymological study reveals that this word has an interesting source. Etiquette suggests a particular code of behavior, but it also originates from the French word *ticket* (Onions, 1996). Referring to August's comments, does this mean that our worldview might provide us entry (admission) into a world to which we normally do not have access?

A conversation with August would help me to understand at a deeper level the role of ecological identity in our lives. Although August is a character of fiction, there are people in the world who demonstrate a worldview similar to hers and have correspondingly dedicated their lives to helping others. In their book *Cultural Creatives*, Ray and Anderson (2000) described the growing number of people with a worldview similar to August's as *cultural creatives* who, in their view, are people who care deeply about the social and ecological problems that we face today and have changed or adapted their lifestyle in a way that reflects these concerns; they are people whose worldview is not bound by the narrow, individualistic perspectives of either traditionalism or modernism. Cultural creatives represent a wide range of people, but they all try to live their lives in a way that reflects a congruency between their beliefs, values, and day-to-day behavior. Ray and Anderson saw these people as important sources of social and political change.

In my own life I have met or known people who could be described as cultural creatives. They come from a wide variety of locations, but all have demonstrated a commitment and passion to live their lives in a manner that is congruent with their experiences of being ecological beings. These people are social workers, educators, environmentalists, Aboriginal elders, and "ordinary" citizens who have clearly adopted a wider sense of identity and have made choices to live their lives accordingly. Some are seen as community leaders who speak out publicly about the connection between our ecological and social woes. Others make more personal changes such as simplifying their lives by reducing their consumption or changing their means of transportation. There is also a growing number of people who are using wilderness and other special places as a source of their own or others' healing. These are the type of people I would like to engage in conversation.

## Ecological Identity Research

For a number of reasons I have chosen to interview social workers who have demonstrated an interest in the concept of ecological identity and its implication for practice. This topic has significant personal interest to me and reflects a lifelong attempt to integrate my experiences in nature with my professional life as a social worker and social work educator. As the first two chapters of this dissertation suggest, an understanding of the concept of ecological identity has the potential to make a significant contribution to the field of social work. My interest in pursuing this research topic is also driven by the seemingly intractable social problems that social workers face. For example, the disabling effects of poverty continue to exist, the gap between rich and poor continues to widen, and communities in general are struggling to maintain the capacity to care for those in need. The persistence of these social problems suggests that something different needs to be done. Many writers have argued that linking social problems with the ecological crisis is an important first step. It is my belief that exploring the concept of ecological identity will not only help to link the social with the ecological, but will also lead to more creative ways to address the above challenges.

The work of Stets and Biga (2003) helps to set the context for a research project that explores the concept of ecological identity. These authors argued that, more than any other variable, the identity that a person claims is by far the most important indicator in determining behavior. They reported that empirical studies show a weak relationship between behavior and variables such as values, intentions, attitudes, and gender. In their review of the literature on the reasons that people act the way that they do (especially as it relates to the environment), they pointed out that a person's identity is very seldom taken into consideration. This is highly problematic, because in their research Stets and Biga discovered that how one identifies oneself—or, in their words, "attaches meaning to self" (p. 401)—is the best predictor of behavior.

Stets and Biga (2003) also provided a useful framework for understanding identity. They defined *identity* as a "set of meanings attached to the self that serves as a standard of reference that guides behavior in situations" (p. 401) and *environmental* identity as a *person* identity, which, they suggested, includes self-meaning that is linked to the individual themselves rather than being attached to a particular role or positioning in the social structure. Stets and Biga contrasted person identity with *role* identity, which is how identity researchers typically explore identity. A role identity encompasses the meaning that an individual attaches to him-/herself as an occupant of a role in the social structure, such as being male/female, student, friend, mother/father, and so on. Because environmental identity is categorized as a personal identity, it encompasses a general reference to the self, including the characteristics and attributes that individuals see as representing who they are, how they feel, and what they value. In addition, Stets and Biga asserted that person identities operate across various role identities and are maintained or challenged by the feedback that an individual receives when he/she is engaged in behavior linked to environmental identity.

Stets and Biga (2003) suggested that person identities can be conceptualized as hierarchically arranged in terms of prominence and salience. The prominence of a particular person identity reflects an identity that best matches one's ideal self. In the authors' opinion, the prominence depends upon the degree to which one gets support from others, is committed to the identity, and receives intrinsic and extrinsic rewards from that identity. The more prominent the identity, the more likely it will be enacted in a particular situation. In this regard the salience of an identity refers to the probability of enacting or the readiness to play out a line of action that is consistent in meaning with the identity that is being claimed.

According to Stets and Biga (2003), ecologically sustainable behavior is strongly linked to an individual's identity. Their conclusions support the goal of understanding ecological identity in more depth. Their argument linking identity and behavior also supports the goal of understanding how ecological identity may have implications for the way that social work is practiced. To clarify a framework for understanding ecological identity, Stets and Biga introduced the notion of person identity (contrasted with role identity) and emphasized that the meaning that we ascribe to ourselves or our idealized selves is crucial to identity formation.

Like all good research, that of Stets and Biga (2003) has raised a number of important questions. Central to their work is the question, "What meanings do we ascribe to ourselves that lead us to claim an environmental or ecological identity?" In addition, their work also suggests that person-identity claims can result in behavior that spans the number of role identities that we play out in our lives. This is an interesting notion and worthy of exploration in more depth. In the case of this study, my goal was to gain an understanding of how our ecological identity plays out in the role of social worker. In an overall sense, Stets and Biga set a context for further study related to the role that identity, and in particular ecological or environmental identity, plays in our personal and working lives.

## Return to Experience

Although Stets and Biga's (2003) work is compelling and has provoked a number of important questions, it does have a significant limitation that needs to be acknowledged. They argued that an ecological identity is maintained and supported by people's social support group, their level of commitment to their ecological identity, and the amount of intrinsic or external rewards that they receive for their identity-linked behavior. However, Stets and Biga seem to have omitted or at least downplayed the role of nature in both the formation and the maintenance of an ecological identity. Fisher (2002) criticized environmental research for exactly this reason. He argued that a great deal of environmental psychology and environmental sociology research that explores the human-nature relationship is ultimately dualistic. This dualism is represented in a form of bifurcation that separates and alienates humans from the natural world. Fisher explained that research based on this notion is highly problematic in that it simplifies the question or problem being addressed and that it

> medicalizes the ecological crisis, treating it as a kind of clinical problem to be technologically solved . . . . Through this type of research we discover little as to what this crisis is all about, who we are, or what it means to be a human being on a living earth. (p. 33)

In regard to an ecological identity, meaning emerges not only from our social context, but also through our direct experiences in nature. To overcome the dualistic notions that separate humans from nature, Abram (1996) urged us to consider the philosophical movement of phenomenology, which is interested in the study of human experience. Phenomenologists argue that our pretheoretical understandings of reality actually do not match our own lived experiences. Phenomenology is interested in lived experience and the attempt to "re-achieve a direct and primal contact with the world" (Fisher, 2002, p. 11). To overcome the dualistic notion that separates humans from the rest of the world, phenomenology posits that separating the inner self and the manner in which meaning is created from the rest of the world is highly problematic. Phenomenology entails the idea that the inside world of our selves and the outside world are actually one interactive structure that is described as *being-in-the-world*. In this regard there can never be a so-called inner experience because our experience is always of the world. In a physical sense we can never find the very place where we experience and create meaning in the world. In this light, experience is considered a consequence of an existing set of relations. We are not locked up inside ourselves but, in fact, find ourselves in a web of worldly interactions in which our existence continually unfolds.

Ecological identity is born from our experiences in nature and the meanings that we ascribe to these experiences. An exploration of ecological identity therefore requires an in-depth understanding of the relationship between experience and meaning. A study of ecological identity also requires an understanding of the role of language in our meaning-making endeavors. David Abram (1996) suggested that the schism between nature and humans began to form when humans began to introduce nonpictograph writing systems and the signifier no longer visually resembled the signified (using the linguistic terms of Ferdinand de Saussure). In this regard, not only is a study of ecological identity a study of experience and how we come to claim an ecological identity, but it also must encompass an exploration of the role that text and language play in our meaning-making efforts. Focusing on experience, meaning, and language also raised the question of my role as a researcher. If experience is highly relational and language plays an important role in understanding, how could I make any claims of understanding my research topic in a deeper or more comprehensive way?

To address this challenge I turned to the philosophical tenets and practical approach of hermeneutic inquiry. In general, hermeneutic inquiry explores human experience and how we come to understand experience. Fisher (2002) found hermeneutics very useful and practical in understanding the human-nature relationship. He pointed to hermeneutics' emphasis on the "strange" or what has been "lost" as a point of entry to understanding. In Fisher's view, the human propensity to ignore or omit nature in meaning making has made trees, birds, and other nonhuman life strange and alienated. In a hermeneutic sense, "coming to understanding" occurs only when we allow the "Other"—in this case, nature—to make a claim upon us. Naess (1995), Abram (1996), and others have argued that humans, for a number of different reasons, have lost the propensity to respond to nature's claim. When we deny nature a voice or any form of subjectivity, we lose the opportunity to learn more about ourselves. Conversely, when we allow nature to make a claim upon us, we are faced with the risk of being changed.

With regard to my goal of meeting with social workers to discuss their understanding of what it means to have an ecological identity and the implications of this on their practice, hermeneutic inquiry offers a useful and relevant framework. The philosophical tenets of hermeneutics offer a compelling view of how understanding occurs within a dialogue or conversation between two people. It not only provides a thorough understanding of the role that language plays in this process, but also reveals how "coming to understand" is a highly intersubjective activity. From this perspective, the practical components of hermeneutic inquiry gave me a clear understanding of my role as a researcher and how I could conduct my research.

To better understand the philosophical tradition of hermeneutics and the practical implications for my research, I have divided the remainder of this chapter into three sections. The first section provides an historical overview of the philosophy of hermeneutics and how it emerged within the social science field. The next section offers a more specific look at the primary tenets of hermeneutic thought and how they apply to my research topic. The final section of this chapter describes the steps that I followed in conducting my research and the role and attitudes that I assumed as a researcher.

## Hermeneutics: An Historical Overview

Hermeneutic inquiry has a long and interesting history in the human sciences. A study of the history and development of hermeneutics reveals a struggle similar to the one that emerges within the ecological identity discourse. Both attempt to overcome what Jardine (1998) described as "Descartes' nightmare" (p. 5). Jardine suggested that the Cartesian privileging of the Cogito (thinking) has, among other things, left us as disembodied beings isolated from the world around us. This has led to a profound alienation from the way that life is actually lived as well as not only a limited view of our place in the world, but also a crippled understanding of how meaning in our lives is created.

As already pointed out, the ecological identity discourse attempts to broaden our understanding of ourselves and places us in a complex and highly relational world. This challenges us to leave our narrow, self-defined identity behind by acknowledging how our identities co-emerge within a myriad of relationships. In a similar manner, the tradition of hermeneutics over the course of hundreds of years has placed humans "back in the world" through an acknowledgement that we are deeply embedded in our social/historical context and that coming to any understanding is a highly relational and dynamic activity. In many ways hermeneutics has attempted to "restore life to its original difficulty" (Caputo, 1987, p. 1) by avoiding the Cartesian tendency to transcend the difficult and highly relational task of creating meaning in our lives.

Before moving to a description of how I hope to conduct my research, I will explore the historical development and philosophical tenets that underpin hermeneutic inquiry. In this regard it is perhaps best to start with an exploration of the word *hermeneutics* itself. Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek root *hermeneuo*, which means "to interpret." In Greek mythology the god Hermes (whose name was derived from the Greek root *hermeneuo*) played an important role in interpreting the message sent from the gods to mortals living on earth. The myth of Hermes reveals, however, that he often found himself in trouble because he did not accurately interpret the messages given to him. As a result, humans were unable to fully understand the messages intended for them. This story raises a question about the important relationship between understanding and interpretation. It also points to the inherent power bestowed on the interpreter and begs the question, What does good interpretation involve?

Early researchers in the field of hermeneutics attempted to articulate a standard method of how the Bible could be interpreted. Christian scholars believed that if certain rules were followed, an author's original intent could be realized. However, this was built upon the highly questionable assumption that meaning is a static phenomenon and that language has a universal (means the same thing to all people) quality to it. Early scholars believed that the text of a historical writing could be accurately and fully determined with the right technique. Caputo (1987) described this as the *postal service approach* in that interpretation was seen as a step-by-step approach to "delivering" the original author's intended message.

In the 19th century Friedrich Schleiermacher and later William Dilthey (both as cited in Richardson, 2002) attempted to expand the realm of interpretive work from interpreting not only text, but also human experience. Although he still maintained the original conservative (postal service) approach to interpretation, Schleiermacher linked interpretation to understanding by promoting the idea that understanding is in fact the "art" of interpretation. He also argued that to gain an understanding of the authors' original meaning, language needed to be understood within the historical epoch in which it was written. Schleiermacher believed that interpretation and understanding are essentially creative acts that involve a particular "spirit" of creativity, which he linked to the feminine.

Perhaps Schleiermacher's (as cited in Smith, 2002) most enduring contribution to the field of hermeneutics is his notion of the hermeneutic circle. Throughout the historical development of hermeneutics, this concept is continually referred to and expanded upon. Schleiermacher's idea of the hermeneutic circle encompassed the belief that understanding involves a dialectical relationship between part and whole. By this he meant that the part will never be understood without referring to the whole, and in a similar sense the whole will never be understood without considering the part (Gallagher, 1992). Smith gave an example of how this works in our daily lives: "I meet you and form an impression. We have a conversation, and what I learn changes my initial impression. We do something else together, and again my impression is revised" (p. 3). This back-and-forth or circular process in which the part informs the whole and the whole informs the part can be described as an ever-widening circle that leads to new and deeper meaning.

Although Schleiermacher's (as cited in Caputo, 1987) romanticist view was a clear step away from the original, more narrow view of hermeneutics, it was Dilthey (as cited in Smith 2002) who paved the way for the development of hermeneutics in the human sciences. Dilthey argued that the natural and human sciences are fundamentally different and therefore require different modes of investigation. He suggested that natural science exists in the realm of explanation and description, whereas human science is more focused upon understanding. In fact, Dilthey described human understanding as an important category of life. In Dilthey's view all of the expressions of our lives such as art, gestures, voice, and so on emerge from the understanding that we derive from our own lived experience (*Erlebinis*). Dilthey made a strong argument for the connection between our lived experience and how we express ourselves. Interpretation of experience then became strongly linked to understanding and has been seen as the fundamental difference between the human and positivist sciences (Ricoeur, 1981).

From Dilthey's concept of lived experience, or *Erlebinis*, Edmund Husserl (as cited in Smith, 1999b) moved out into the world by putting into play what he called the "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*). Husserl believed that the split between subject and objective thinking is erroneous because our subjectivity is actually determined from the very world that we experience in our day-to-day lives. As Smith succinctly stated:

> I cannot abstract thinking itself out from what it is that I am thinking about. A clear split between subjective thinking and objective thinking is not sustainable because my subjectivity gets its bearings from the very world that I take as my object. (p. 32)

Husserl also maintained that because the world is always shared, how we describe it can always be altered or modified by how we communicate with others.

Husserl's (as cited in Smith, 1999b) work was instrumental in that it challenged many long-held beliefs embedded within the enlightenment discourse. His work carved out a new relationship between Self and Other and challenged us to acknowledge the dynamic and highly relational character of understanding. Perhaps the most important aspect of Husserl's work was that he articulated a first step towards freeing ourselves from the limitations of objective reason. He situated words such as *understanding* and *interpretation* in the "dialogical, intersubjective and conversational nature of human experience" (p. 32). This brought forward the role of the "Other" in our understanding and opened up a wide array of possibilities and potential directions for "life-world" research.

Martin Heidegger (1962) took a decidedly different turn from that of his predecessor Husserl and in the process radically changed the meaning of hermeneutics.

Heidegger criticized the notion of Dilthey and others that humans could step back or transcend the process of interpretation. On the contrary, Heidegger believed that interpretation is the foundation of "Being" itself. He introduced the concept of *Dasein*, which, translated, means "there-being" and refers to our contingent situatedness in space and time. No matter how hard we try, Heidegger argued, we could never leave behind our spatial and temporal circumstances because they are never of our own making.

In Heidegger's view the self and world are not two beings, like subject and object, but, rather, are the unity of the structure of "being-in-the-world." Heidegger's views led to a significant turn in hermeneutics because he embedded humans in their historical and linguistic context. He described language as historically mediated and the "Home of Being"; as a result, he pointed to language as an important source of understanding. In regard to history, Heidegger did not merely say that we live our lives through time, but, more important, he proposed the thesis that who we are is through and through historical. "This concept refers to the claim that the relation between being human and finding ourselves in particular historical circumstances is not accidental but rather essential or ontological" (Wachterhauser, 1986, p. 7).

Heidegger's work seriously questioned the whole notion of method in the human sciences, because thinking and method could never be separated. "Method could never achieve a kind of solitary stable state ready for universal application, because indeed it bore the same character and quality as that to which it sought access" (Smith 1999b, p. 32). Hans-Georg Gadamer (1994) built upon Heidegger's historical-temporal quality of human experience and developed what is commonly referred today as *philosophical hermeneutics*. In his well-known work *Truth and Method*, Gadamer agreed with

Heidegger and criticized any attempt to develop objective interpretation because of the fact that we are "played" by our own language and historical situation (Gallagher, 1992).

In Gadamer's (1994) view, hermeneutics should not focus upon particular methods of interpretation, but rather on the question of what enables understanding to occur in the first place. It is not in the procedures or method that Gadamer was interested as much as the conditions that allow understanding to emerge. Hermeneutics, in Gadamer's view, was not about the recovery of existing meaning, but more about the creation of meaning itself (Smits, 2001).

Gadamer (1994) played an important role in the development of philosophical hermeneutics during the 20th century. Not only did his life span this entire century, but his ideas also still hold an important place in hermeneutic thought today. In particular, Gadamer proposed two important concepts that helped to develop a clearer understanding of the hermeneutic process. Building on Heidegger's work, he clarified the role of prejudice in our understanding and introduced the important concept of *effective historical consciousness*. Unlike enlightenment thinkers before him, Gadamer believed that prejudice plays an important role in human understanding and that it is a necessary condition for further understanding. These forestructures (already with us through past experience and the language we used) were considered necessary for understanding to occur. Gadamer described these prejudgments and so on as "horizons" and the starting point or platform from which human understanding and action began.

Gadamer (1994) argued that the "object" under study and the interpreter himself are both part of an historical and cultural tradition or continuum of what he called effective history. Effective history plays itself out in the culture and traditions of our times and leads to the prejudices that either help or hinder our understanding. In this light, Gadamer suggested that we need to develop a historical-effective consciousness and pay particular attention to our prejudices, which is the type of reflection required to understand the historical continuum in which one belongs. When we recollect the past we actively appropriate it to the self. It is important to note, however, that, in true hermeneutic fashion, when we recollect the past we are interpreting it from the perspective of our historically influenced present (Kerby, 1991).

This deep embeddedness in our historical and linguistic situation led Gadamer (1994) to believe that the only way that understanding can take place between two people is when a conversation between them allows for a particular synthesis of their views. According to Smith (1999b):

> This means that understanding between two [illegible] is possible only to the degree that people can initiate a conversation between [illegible] and bring about a fusion of their different horizons into a new understanding which they then hold in common. (p. 32)

This new understanding or fusion of horizons can occur only when we allow the standpoint of another to affect us in such a way that we are willing to be influenced by the perspective of another (Thompson, 1990). Understanding, then, is a result of a dynamic process (event) between two people in which the meeting of their horizons leads to new meaning.

In summary, hermeneutic inquiry is not about finding truth (which is highly contingent and relational), but rather about the ongoing process of appreciating the conditions necessary for understanding to occur. Because of our historical and linguistic situatedness, life is understood as a continual process of interpretation because everything presented to us (language, text, art) always has something "hidden," beyond our own horizon of understanding. Gadamer (1994) argued that language, culture, and tradition play a crucial role in our meaning-making process and occur beyond our own subjectivity. He described this as a realm of play that needs to be acknowledged in any interpretive effort. To "play" in this realm, Gadamer believed that people need to take into account their own historicality, the role that language plays in understanding, and their own relationship with what is to be interpreted.

## Ecological Identity and the Hermeneutic Endeavor

> It is not only the historical tradition and the natural order of life constitute the unity of the world in which we live as men; the way we experience one another, the way we experience historical traditions, the way we experience the natural givenness of our existence and of our world, constitute a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened. (Gadamer, 1994, p. xxiv)

Philosophical hermeneutics offers a challenging yet exciting perspective on what it means to engage in research. Hermeneutic thinkers contend that language and history are always both conditions and limits of understanding. In this regard philosophical hermeneutics portrays any meaning-making activity as a highly contextualized process determined more by the time and place it occurs than by any independent, autonomous observer. This viewpoint complicates my research efforts because it raises questions about my role as a researcher and how I can make any claim about my research topic. Hermeneutics, however, does not leave me imprisoned by the time and language in which I live. In fact, it provides me with a unique philosophical framework that yields a practical approach to my research effort. This section provides a more detailed look at the primary tenets of hermeneutic inquiry, especially as Hans-Georg Gadamer described them, and what directions these tenets offer in relation to my goal of understanding the concept of ecological identity in more depth.

The work of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer reflects a critical stance towards the philosophical assumptions that existed before them. The turn to phenomenological hermeneutics involved a direct challenge to the Cartesian project, which assumed a human propensity to make definitive claims about reality by insisting that a foundational understanding of the world existed and that this reality could be determined by an isolated, autonomous cogito. Heidegger's and Gadamer's views complicated the notion of a determinable reality and questioned the assumptions underpinning the goal of objectivity. These thinkers saw history and language as a transcendental condition of all understanding and believed that these, *a priori,* were always different in different contexts. In a hermeneutic sense, "all human understanding is never without words and never outside of time" (Wachterhauser, 1986, p. 5). As a result, any individual engaged in a research endeavor is always seen in the context of history and time. Hermeneutic thinkers did not call for the demise of the natural sciences but did argue that they needed to be understood in the time and language in which they emerged. Most important, hermeneutic thought encompassed the view that the natural sciences did not offer a way of understanding that could help humans to meet the challenges that they face in their everyday lives. Jardine (1992) suggested that not only does hermeneutics involve a restoring life to its original difficulty, as Caputo (1987) suggested, but that it also involves "a returning of the possibility of living" (p. 119).

Heidegger's (1962) concept of *Dasein* or "being -there" was an attempt to portray humans in a highly contextualized manner. Heidegger rejected the view that humans are autonomous, unified, and self-transparent subjects. The concept of *Dasein* reflects a "being in the world" and suggests that how we project ourselves (i.e., create meaning) is in large part determined by our linguistic and temporal context. Heidegger was critical of any claim or understanding of humans as "substantial" beings with any definitive or stable identity. The concept of *Dasein* reflects humans and their meaning-making attempts as an emerging phenomenon that requires an ability to understand humans and their capacity to understand as an unfinished project. What humans claim to understand is "always already" impacted by the times in which they live and the language that they use. In this regard, understanding should be seen as an ongoing process and the goal of determining the world "once and for all" must be seen as an impossible task.

Gadamer (1994) built upon Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* and his critique of subjectivity by exploring how we come to meaning through our lived experience. He viewed Heidegger's philosophical framework as an opportunity to understand the meaning-making process in more depth. In his famed work *Truth and Method* he stated, "It seems to me that the productive thing about Heidegger's criticism of modern subjectivism is that his temporal interpretation of being has opened up new possibilities" (p. 99). In Gadamer's view the challenge of subjectivism that Heidegger identified raises important philosophical questions. In his words:

> The philosophical question asks, what is the being of self-understanding? With this question it fundamentally transcends the horizon of the self-understanding. In disclosing time as the ground hidden from self understanding, it does not preach blind commitment out of nihilistic despair, but opens itself to a hitherto concealed experience that transcends thinking form the position of subjectivity, an experience that Heidegger calls being. (pp. 99-100)

From this point Gadamer embarked on a path to explore how humans understand their lived experiences by acknowledging that these experiences are always transcended by history and language. Considering these conditions, he clearly illustrated a process of how humans come to understand themselves as in the world by describing the highly relational nature of understanding. He then provided a helpful framework that allows us the opportunity to create new meaning in our lives, which he hoped would help us to live more fully.

Gadamer (1994) advised that we consider our meaning-making capacity within the context of the traditions in which we live:

> Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. (p. 276)

The traditions of which Gadamer spoke emerge over time and not only create the context in which we live, but, more important, also impact the way that we interpret our lived experiences. In Gadamer's view the tradition in which we live informs us and teaches us in ways that are in most cases not evident to us. Human tradition and the history from which it emerge determine our capacity to understand a particular phenomenon by setting both the limits and potentialities of our understanding. Gadamer described this finite nature of understanding: "Every actualization in understanding can be regarded as a historical potential of what is understood. It is part of the historical finitude of our being that we are aware that others after us will understand in a different way" (p. 373). This is not to suggest that we are locked into one way of understanding, but it does suggest that the past limits the number of possible ways in which we can understand. Given the condition of finiteness, Gadamer argued that our desire to understand a particular life experience should not be overshadowed by the more important task of exploring *how* we come to understand, for it is only through learning more about how our historically influenced present shapes our understanding that we can move towards the future in any responsible manner.

In Gadamer's (1994) view, language plays an important role in understanding because it has a mediating function between our past, present, and future. He saw language as the common thread that transports meaning from the past to the present and in turn influences how we perceived the future. Gadamer proposed that language always precedes reflective understanding and determines how we grasped any topic or subject. The important emphasis that Gadamer placed on language suggests that humans could never transcend the fundamental linguistic nature of their understanding. From this point he contended that because of this fundamental linguistic nature of understanding, we can never really say that we understand any subject or topic in its entirety. Our understanding is always shaped historically by language because, as Gadamer believed, language is not a neutral object at our disposal, but is saturated with the values and beliefs inherent in the traditions in which we exist and perceive the world. In this light, understanding does not occur in any separate, naïve, or untouched sphere of the mind (that relies upon neutral and arbitrary signs), but occurs in a community of language where shared understanding is the point where the opportunity for understanding exists.

Hermeneutic thought is highly critical of any reference to an autonomous "knowing subject" because it portrays understanding as a highly contextual process. History and the mediating function of language always precipitated a particular finitude or limit to our claim to understand. What became more important to Gadamer (1994) then was not to make claims about what we know, but to critically reflect upon how it is that we actually came to know. He suggested that an attempt to understand requires an historical consciousness that necessitates an exploration of how the past plays a critical role in our present-day inquiries. He also emphasized the need for sensitivity to the highly interpretive nature of language in that there are always many different and multivocal ways of talking about a particular experience. Finally, and perhaps most important, Gadamer concluded that a central task of understanding is to acknowledge that our understanding is always saturated with historical and linguistic prejudice. This reflects Gadamer's attempt to challenge the notion of an all-knowing subject. Considering these prejudices, Gadamer argued that our understanding should be seen as a "horizon" where both the limits and the potential to understand exist.

However, the potential and limitations inherent in our horizon of understanding cannot be altered by an independent and autonomous effort; our horizon of understanding can be altered only through an active engagement with an "others" horizon. In Gadamer's (1994) view, it is in conversation or dialogue with another human being and at the point at which their horizons meet that the dynamic of understanding takes place. He described this fusion of horizons as the point at which both similarities and differences offer a rich and fertile place for new understanding to occur. This is a critical point in hermeneutic thought because it goes against the philosophical tradition that went before it by suggesting that coming to understand is a highly relational activity and occurs within a particular structure inherent in dialogue:

> For knowledge to be learned, the position is of alterity is indispensable: . . . knowledge, in other words, is not a substance but a structural dynamic; it is not contained by any individual but comes about out of the mutual apprenticeship between two partially unconscious speeches that both say more than they know. Dialogue is thus the radical condition of learning and of knowledge, the analytically constitutive condition through which ignorance becomes structurally informative; knowledge is essentially, irreducibly dialogic. (Felman, 1987, p. 83)

Within this structure of dialogue, meaning is not held by one person or the other but transpires in a place between them. For this to occur, both individuals need to be genuinely interested in learning more about a particular topic and resist the desire to be right. Those involved in genuine conversation engage in a process that leads them to something previously unseen about a particular topic or phenomenon, something that transcends the expectations of either person. In their own historically and linguistically mediated context, the conversants engage in a process of uncovering or bringing something new to the forefront, which moves them past their own preconceptions and allows them to see the topic of discussion in a different light. Gadamer (1994) described this dynamic as an *event* that occurs in conversation when we are surprised or struck by something that stands out as being different or strange:

> The real nature of a sudden idea is perhaps less that a solution occurs to us that breaks through into the open and thereby makes an answer possible. Every sudden idea has the structure of a question. But the sudden occurrence of the question is already a breach in the smooth forum of popular opinion. Hence we say that a question too "occurs" to us, that it "arises" or presents itself" more than we raise it or present it. (p. 366)

Because of the highly contextualized nature of understanding, however, Gadamer suggested that although these events may lead to new or advanced understanding, this new understanding never becomes static because it always carries with it the possibility of further interpretation.

Our preconceived understanding of a particular phenomenon can be advanced, however, only if we allow ourselves to be "claimed" by what transpires within a conversation. That is, we must understand the differences, surprises, and strangeness that we encounter in conversation as having the potential to say something to us. In this regard coming to understand involves a particular risk—a risk that encompasses the possibility that our preconceived (conscious or unconscious) ways of understanding may be altered. When we are compelled to look more deeply into events that challenge us in their difference and so on, we are given the opportunity to learn something new about a particular phenomenon. This in turn allows us to apply our new understanding to the phenomenon itself and come to understand it in a different light. This is referred to as the *hermeneutic circle.* Ellis (1998, p. 27) described this process as the forward arc of the circle encompassing the forestructure of our understanding and the backward arc of the circle representing the changing of these forestructures, and this change leading to a new understanding of our topic.

The way in which one enters the hermeneutic circle is very important. Because coming to understanding takes place within dialogue, one must possess a keen ability to listen carefully and a particular sensitivity to what is strange or different. Listening in this manner also calls for an ability to respond in a way that promotes a conversation that allows for new questions to arise. In Gadamer's (1994) view, every conversation is an attempt to answer a particular question. Understanding always emerges from a place of not knowing or negativity.

> We have already seen that, logically considered, the negativity of experience implies a question. In fact we have experiences when we are shocked by things that do not accord with our expectations. Thus question too is more a passion than an action. A question presses itself on us; we can longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion. (p. 366)

The challenge then is to discover what lies behind the language and related meanings of a particular topic. What lies behind often emerges as a question, and it is here that the capacity to "break open" our preconceived understanding lies. In this regard, coming to understanding is better seen as a process of uncovering what lies behind our meaning-making efforts in a way that allows the phenomenon being discussed to slowly reveal itself. A successful hermeneutic endeavor therefore requires humility because it rests upon the premise that no one ever knows completely and that engaging in the risky activity of uncovering new questions is more important than resting on the security of 'sure' answers.

Understanding a particular phenomenon in this manner does not mean that a definitive answer arises that allows us to finally put a problem to rest. It does, however, allow us to explore how a particular phenomenon, experience, and so on can be talked about in the context of how we ascribe meaning to it and how this might be relevant to our daily lives. Herein lies the validity of hermeneutics. The hermeneutic endeavor does not rest in the tasks of confirmation or prediction, but encompasses the organic process of how we come to understanding and what this says about how we can live our lives. Hermeneutics is an attempt to understand life as we live it and provides us with the opportunity to imagine what life could be like in the future. Hermeneutic inquiry can be understood as a moral endeavor because it offers an invitation to consider how living and coming to understand are deeply intertwined. In fact, the tradition of hermeneutics can be seen as a way of exploring the very conditions in which live can carry on (Smith, 1988). Because the hermeneutic endeavor encompasses an inherent "risk" of personal change, it can also be understood as a process that includes the development of the self. We are compelled to bring our whole self to hermeneutic endeavor and face the risk of 'suffering' through a change in the way that we understand or perceive the world (Ellis, 1998, p. 9). Consequently, we become more accountable for behaving in a manner that is congruent with these newly discovered horizons.

The hermeneutic tradition and the philosophical insights it offers provide a provocative and exciting direction for a study related to ecological identity. My interest in studying the questions "What does it mean to have an ecological identity, and what implications does it have for practice?" can be understood in the context in which I live. These questions emerge within a time of unprecedented environmental destruction that is forcing us to rethink ourselves in the context of our relationship to nature. Over the last 30 years there has been a dramatic increase in the academic literature that reflects an attempt to answer this question. Within this literature there is also a general acceptance of the importance of linking social problems with ecological problems and a strong argument emerging that suggests that the two should not be considered separately. In regard to identity and the questions of who we are and what our place in the world is, the postmodern context has complicated the notion of the self and subjectivity and has criticized the notion of an independent, autonomous self-identity. In an overall sense, it could be said that the conditions that exist in our current social, political, and economic circumstances have provided the conditions for my research topic to emerge.

However, it is important to note that although the current circumstances can be seen as having provided the conditions for my research to surface, it is also important to acknowledge that my current understanding of the concept of ecological identity under these circumstances is limited as well. Within the historical and linguistic limits associated with this study lay the potential to understand my research topic in new and, I hope, deeper and more applicable ways. The challenge was to find a way of uncovering the questions that the ecological identity discourse was trying to answer and to attempt to explore these questions so that new meaning could emerge. This was the implicit goal of this research project: I hoped to engage individuals in a conversation about the question of ecological identity and not only to closely track how new understanding develops, but also to apply this new understanding to the social-work task of helping others.

In a general sense, the hermeneutic traditions call for a practical wisdom (Dunne, 1993). The Greek work *phronesis* implies a way of living in the world that allows us to engage in the human endeavor of creating meaning through a more intuitive, holistic process. It encompasses a bringing forth of one's self into the meaning process in a way that allows for creativity, imagination, and an ability to apply meaning to a particular context or problem. Understanding is not seen as an attempt to know something once and for all, but rather as more of a commitment to understanding the circumstances in which meaning transpires. This type of wisdom considers life and the process of coming to understanding essentially the same phenomenon. Humans are essentially meaning-making beings. When understanding becomes static, the potential for life to go on is thwarted. When the possibility for understanding and new meaning exists, life is able to continue. It also entails the notion that any attempt to determine a static, definable, infinitely determined reality is dysfunctional in that it goes against our day-to-day lived experience. The way that we understand is always in flux and dependent upon the problems that we face and the conditions in which we live. Wisdom comes from knowing this and adjusting in a manner that allows us to live in a highly adaptive, open, and creative manner.

## Engaging in the Hermeneutic Process

The tradition of hermeneutic inquiry and, in particular, the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1994) provided a helpful yet challenging starting point for my research. Smith

(2002) considered the work of Husserl and especially Heidegger as pivotal sources of ecological thought. Hermeneutic philosophy did not provide me with a specific "plan" for conducting my research, but it did offer me a way of understanding myself as a researcher. More important, phenomenological hermeneutics challenged me to conduct my inquiry in the way that life is actually lived; that is, as an interpretive endeavor that is highly relational and contingent upon the time, space, and language in which I (and my research participants) "live."

In this case my research involved an intersubjective process in which I engaged in conversations with three social workers who had demonstrated an interest in and a commitment to addressing social problems from an ecological identity perspective. I audiorecorded each of these conversations and transcribed each of the recordings for further interpretive analysis. From my conversations with the participants, I then engaged in the process of interpretive writing to demonstrate a deeper understanding of this research topic. My ultimate goal was not to offer any definitive answer, but to write in a way that challenges both myself and my reader to continue the "conversation" related to ecological identity in a new and deeper way. I will turn to the hermeneutic practice of conversation, questioning, and interpretive writing to articulate the process of my research more clearly.

### *Conversation*

According to Gadamer (1994), "To reach understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (p. 379). Social-work educator Margaretha Wilcke (2002) saw the philosophical principles that underpin hermeneutic inquiry as highly congruent with social work practice. I agree and believe that my training as a social worker enhanced my ability to engage in meaningful conversations with the research participants. My experience as a therapist has helped me to understand the role that conversation played in assisting not only my clients, but also me to come to new understanding. In my work I have also learned firsthand how my own prejudices have either helped or hindered this process. I am acutely aware of the role of language in our attempts to explain life experiences and, along with my clients, have experienced the excitement (and perhaps freedom) of discovering that language is not "set in stone" and does not need to determine who we are "once and for all."

If understanding was to be a dynamic process that would emerge within a conversation between two people, a number of requirements had to be met. There was a particular demand upon me to be radically open to the ideas, perceptions, and horizons of the person with whom I talked. This required a particular humility in that I needed to acknowledge that understanding lies in the realm where "horizons meet," not within my own prejudices and views. In essence, this suggested that I needed to be open to their ideas and face the risk of being changed by what they might have said. I had to be prepared to listen intently and develop a sensitivity to what struck me or seemed strange or alien to my own understanding. It was at this point that the "event" of understanding took place.

It was the other's views and ideas that were required to unsettle or "crack open" my own prejudices or preconceived understandings. To come to terms with my own multilayered, historically mediated views, I needed to listen in a manner that allowed me to be addressed by what the other person said. Being addressed involves understanding a phenomenon by "assimilating what is said to the point that it becomes one's own" (Gadamer, 1994, p. 398). *Assimilation* means that I allowed myself to be totally drawn into what the other was saying, and by using intuition and imagination, I was able to analyze, evaluate, and creatively explore what was given to me. The highly mutual and reciprocal process inherent in coming to new understanding calls for more than just one conversation; it calls for a diversity of conversations with a diversity of people, with each conversation offering something different or unique, which leads to a multivoiced understanding of what might have been originally considered a univocal (one-perspective) phenomenon:

> Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says . . . . Thus we do not relate the other's opinion to him but to our own opinions and views. (p. 385)

To promote a variety of views and perspectives on my research topic, I engaged in conversations with three social workers who had demonstrated an interest in my research topic (their names and certain facts have been changed to ensure confidentiality):

- *Donald:* Donald lives in a housing cooperative and is actively involved as a volunteer on the board of directors. He does not drive a car and is very diligent about monitoring and restricting any behavior that could be considered destructive to the environment. Donald is in private practice and sees a wide variety of clients. He has been working as a therapist for approximately 15 years. I have known Donald for many years, and we have had numerous discussions related to my research topic. During a social gathering that both Donald and I attended, I overhead him refer to his "ecological identity." This led me to consider him as a research participant in my study.

- *Rena:* Rena is an Aboriginal woman who has been a social worker for over 15 years. She has worked in a number of settings but is currently working closely with an Elder from her community to provide workshop and treatment services to Aboriginal women. Rena lives and works in the Northwest Territories. In the fall of 2005 Rena sent a letter to the social work program in which I teach and offered to present a workshop to our faculty entitled "Living as if You Were on the Land." Rena suggested that this workshop would help our faculty to develop a broader, more cross-cultural perspective and enhance our ability to work with Aboriginal students. Because of Rena's practical experience and cultural background, I believed that she would bring a unique perspective to my research endeavor.
- *Paula:* Paula lives in a large urban area and works as an organizational consultant. In an earlier part of her life Paula was heavily involved with a Christian organization, but for a number of reasons chose to leave. Paula was referred to me by two colleagues who thought that her work would be of interest to me because she was attempting to integrate an ecological/nature perspective into her work with both individuals and organizations. Paula has been engaged in this type of work for close to 20 years and is seen as an individual who brings a unique perspective to her work. Because I am not

familiar with the type of work that Paula does, I believed that a conversation with her would challenge me in a completely different way.

### *The Role of the Question*

Questioning plays a pivotal role in hermeneutic inquiry. If my conversations with others were to be ultimately interpretable, it would be more important to discover new questions than to determine solutions or final answers (Smits, 2001). Genuine or authentic questioning ensured that I did not foreclose on a topic or lived experience that was ultimately interpretable. It is at the point where my horizon met with another's and where strangeness or difference presented itself that questions emerged. Any new idea that broke through the "rift" of my own sedimented meaning came with a question. In a hermeneutic sense, the question came as a result of this rift and is an essential part of the interpretive process:

> The real nature of a sudden idea is perhaps less that a solution occurs to us that breaks through into the open and thereby makes an answer possible. Every sudden idea has the structure of a question. But the sudden occurrence of the question is already a breach in the smooth front of popular opinion. Hence we say that a question too "occurs" to us, that it "arises" or presents itself more than that we raise it or present it; . . . a question presses itself on us; we no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion. (p. 366)

In this regard, what was important was that I approach my research endeavor with an understanding of the essential role that questioning plays. In my attempt to understand my research participants, I needed to ask questions that would lead me to what I hoped would be more refined questions that would result in deeper understanding. It is only when I stopped and deliberately asked questions and challenged everything that was presented to me as "true" that I came to a more robust or useful understanding. However, I not only needed to ask the research participants questions, but I also had to reflect upon the implications for me. It is the new understanding and questions that surfaced through my conversations with others that have provided the impetus that "presses" or challenges my own views:

> A person who thinks must ask himself questions . . . . This is the reason why understanding is always more than merely recreating someone else's meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's thinking on the subject. (Smits, 2001, p. 375)

The questions inherent in my research originated primarily from the conversations that I had with the research participants. These arose from a genuine desire to understand what they were sharing with me. The questions were not rhetorical in that I tried to prove or uphold one of my previously held beliefs. The purpose of my questions was to initiate further conversation and, I hope, new meaning. Unlike other research approaches, hermeneutics does not prescribe a particular "technology" of questioning, but rather acknowledges that asking questions is an "art" that therefore can emerge only within conversation itself. Within the hermeneutic tradition, questioning is seen as an invitation to entertain the idea that things are not as they seem. The emphasis on questioning also implies that an ultimate answer is never settled or determined.

The questions that I asked the research participants were in large part determined by the flow and content of our conversation. However, I brought central questions to my research endeavor that helped to provide some structure and direction. In true hermeneutic fashion, the questions surfaced not only from my own life experience, but also from the recent writing on the topic of ecological identity. In fact, the discussion in the first two chapters of this dissertation reflect a beginning attempt to answer these questions: "What does it mean to have an ecological identity, and what role does it play in your social work practice?" I presented the questions to each research participant and

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realized that how they answered them would no doubt be different in each of the conversations and partially determined by the questions that would surface within the conversation itself.

The pivotal role that questioning plays in hermeneutic research suggests a number of important points. It illustrates an undeterred belief in the ultimate interpretability of everything presented to us and challenges us to accept the dynamic and even ambiguous nature of understanding. Jardine (2000) advised that this inherent ambiguity in our lives should be embraced and acknowledged for what it offers us: the freedom to learn in a way that reflects the dynamic and highly relational nature of our own lives. It also allows us the opportunity to engage in the challenging and potentially creative process of linking understanding to our temporal and linguistic context. Developing our ability to reflect upon how the past, present, and future are all implicated in our understanding becomes the central task of the hermeneutic endeavor.

### *Interpretive Writing*

After my conversations with the research participants were transcribed, I began to interpret not only the conversations, but also the text that was transcribed from these conversations. Initially, I provided examples from the conversations that demonstrated mutual agreement between the research participants and myself. I also highlighted passages in which I was struck or surprised by what was shared in the conversation, and I pointed out strong links between what was said in our conversation and how it changed the way that my research topic could be understood. Finally, I paid attention to the particular language that was used that, in my opinion (given the context of my study), required further etymological exploration.

From these "points of entry" I attempted to bring my interpretive effort to life by putting into play the historical and linguistic context in which our conversations took place. I was challenged to draw upon past events and circumstance and link them not only to the current meaning of ecological identity, but also to how they shape our thinking about the future. More important, I attempted to articulate further questions that surfaced as a result of the interpretive process. My primary purpose was to reveal what is hidden in the conversation and language related to ecological identity that promotes the notion that what is given to us verbally or in text form is never a static, univocal phenomenon.

Although interpretation is inherently a creative process, the goal of interpretive writing is not to become an art form in itself. Rather, in being consistent with the primary philosophical tenets of phenomenological hermeneutics, my goal was to promote a type of understanding that helps to keep the conversation regarding ecological identity going. I would have done a disservice to my readers if they believed that my writing is a definitive statement about my topic. I hoped to draw them into a dynamic process in which they themselves would be in "conversation" with my writing. I hope that my writing surprises or challenges my readers and elicits a particular "strangeness" that "bumps up" against their own prejudices.

Because my writing is an attempt to reveal something new or hidden, I have written in a style that might exaggerate a point or dwell on what initially seems insignificant to overcome a one-sidedness that so often accompanies understanding. My goal was to expose the hidden or silent part inherent in understanding by "playing" within the realm of history, language, and my own subjectivity. The extent to which I have been successful will be determined by whether I can draw my readers into the ecological identity discourse and inspire them to ask more questions and to bring these questions forward in their daily lives. In the end, I would like to increase the number of "voices" heard in the ecological identity discourse to cultivate a certain ambiguity that will never allow our place in the world to be determined once and for all.

The validity of my writing derives from a number of sources. First, it is important to point out that there is no privileged, externalized way of determining validity (Carson, 1984). However, this does not mean that my research does not consider the capacity to demonstrate validity. Validity in hermeneutic research is determined partly by the researcher's ability to make a strong "case" in his/her interpretive analysis. In a practical sense, my readers will determine whether or not I have had an impact on the way that they think about ecological identity and whether or not my writing has raised new questions for them. My research "results" also have an implicit validity because they have originated from the valid representations of my research participants. In an overall sense, the interpretations and questions that I raised can be "brought back" to my topic and scrutinized to determine whether or not they have led to deeper meaning and decided action. In the end, hermeneutics is a practical endeavor with an ultimately practical purpose.

# CHAPTER 4:

# CONVERSATION AS LIVED

## Engaging Participants

I took a number of steps before engaging my three research participants in conversation. Initially, I phoned each of the social workers whom I planned to interview, briefly described my research project, and asked if they would be interested in participating in this research project. After they indicated their interest in participating, I scheduled an initial face-to-face "pilot" conversation with them. During this first meeting I described my research project in more detail and asked more in-depth question about the work in which they were engaged. The purpose of these initial meetings was to clarify the purpose of my research, review the letter of consent (approved by the EEREB—see Appendix), invite the participants to sign it, and determine whether the research question "What does it mean to have an ecological identity, and what implications does it have for their social work practice?" was compatible with the participants' interests and work environment. In all three cases we came to a mutual agreement that our conversations would be fruitful and would help me to understand my research question in greater depth. Generally speaking, the three research participants also felt that our conversations would help them to articulate and understand their own practice efforts in a more detailed manner. All three pilot interviews ended on a positive note, with both parties looking forward to our conversations together.

I engaged each of the three participants in two interviews that were approximately one hour in length. During the initial conversation I focused primarily on the first part of my research question, "What does it mean to have an ecological identity?" This gave me an excellent opportunity to build rapport with the conversant and provided me with a great amount of relevant information to work through. After the first conversation I then spent a significant amount of time listening to our recorded conversations and rereading the transcribed texts from these interviews. During this process of "living through" these conversations I took the time to tune in to what surprised or struck me about the conversation. I also paid special attention to the language that was used and then began to formulate more questions that emerged from this experience for the second interview. During the second interview I focused more upon the question "What role does your understanding of ecological identity play in your social work practice?"

What follows are major excerpts from the conversations with the three social workers whom I chose to interview. All conversations took place in their homes. The conversations were generally relaxed and free flowing and came to an end when we both felt satisfied with the manner in which we had addressed the topic. The format in which I have presented these conversations in this chapter has three distinct components. The left-hand column records the responses of the individual, followed by the question that I posed. In the right-hand column are some summarizing and reflective comments that helped me to articulate various themes that emerged and assisted me in determining the possible "interpretive paths" available to me.

I have included significant excerpts from the narratives of the research participants for a number of reasons. Providing major excerpts from the conversations facilitates sharing their unique expertise and experience. In this respect, the recorded text from these conversations is valuable in itself. Most important, however, in displaying these conversations in this manner, I extend an invitation to my reader to join me in the interpretive effort. Reviewing each of the conversations will also help my reader to determine whether or not my interpretive efforts are consistent with the tenets inherent in the hermeneutic tradition.

## Familiar Horizons

Before presenting major excerpts from my conversations with the three research participants, it is important to visit the horizons of my own understanding related to the research question. Doing so helps me to locate my research interests within an intersected place of time, language, culture, and personal subjectivity. Outlining my personal experiences and views did not offer a definitive starting point for my research but did provide a place from which my original questions could emerge. Sharing my own horizons of understanding also acts as a touchstone to help me to articulate the circles of meaning that might transpire as a result of my research. Sharing these stories, however, is not an attempt to declare a particular bias or set of biases that will need to be avoided; it is more an attempt to bring forth the meanings and understandings in my own life that were at play within the conversations on which I embarked.

The following are six brief vignettes from both my personal and my professional life that I believe provide a sense of what I brought to the conversations with the research participants. These vignettes are not offered as an encompassing narrative, but they merely highlight some of my relevant experiences and learning that preceded these conversations. I offer these vignettes not as potential obstacles to avoid, but as actually important forestructures that were necessary if I were to understand and learn from what my research participants had to say.

### *Earth and Love*

Throughout this thesis I have shared a number of experiences in which I have had an encounter with nature that has had a lasting impression upon me. Many of these experiences occurred in the wilderness, but this is not where my connection and love for the earth originated. When I was approximately nine years old, my father asked me to help him with his part-time job on the weekends. He was a landscape gardener and needed assistance with cutting grass, pruning hedges, and hoeing flowerbeds. I enjoyed this time with my father immensely. I loved the smell of the cut grass and the look of a well-manicured flowerbed. One day while driving home after a hard day's work, I remember looking at my father's hands on the steering wheel. They were gripped firmly on the steering wheel, and I distinctly remember noticing the dirt under his fingernails. Looking down at my own hands, I realized that I too had dirt under my fingernails. I immediately felt a deep bond with my father. The dirt acted as an emotional catalyst that brought me closer to him. As an adult, whenever I notice dirt under my fingernails, I think of my father and experience the same deep sense of connection I felt almost 45 years ago.

### *Relationship and Loss*

A few years later a number of friends and I managed to "adopt" three baby crows from their nests. We learned to feed them by putting raw hamburger on a stick and then placing it in their mouths. As we fed and watered the crows, they became bonded to us, and as they grew older they would fly away, only to return to their perch for feeding and attention. Although not really noticing it, we became emotionally bonded to the crows as well. One day one of the crows was electrocuted while sitting on a power line and fell to the ground. The crow did not die but, unfortunately, was unable to fly. It seemed to be in a great deal of pain after the fall and just laid on the ground "cawing" to us, as if it were asking for our help. To address this difficult situation, the father of one of my friends picked up the crow by his feet and walked to the bushes at the back of our houses. After being away for quite some time, he came back and stated, "I'm sorry, boys, I had to put him out of his misery." Hearing these words brought tears to my eyes. I was surprised by my sadness, but in a short time I realized that I had loved the bird. It was a profound life lesson for me. I came to learn that my love for animals came with a particular vulnerability that could not be denied and would stay with me for the rest of my life.

### ***Wilderness and Meaning***

As a young man I worked with youth in summer-camp settings. I was fortunate to work as a wilderness counselor and served as a guide on extended canoe trips. Our trips would range from one to two weeks, and many of the trips took place on the Canadian Shield. The water was always crystal clear, and the scenery was often magnificent. It was during these trips that I noticed that the beauty and isolation that we encountered prompted campers and staff alike to think about themselves and their place in the world. I remember many provocative and inspiring conversations around the evening campfire. It was at this time that I began to develop a spiritual side to my life. Although I was raised Catholic, the notion of spirit or God seemed alien and distant to me. Under the blue skies of the Canadian Shield, however, I felt as though I were in deep conversation with something much greater than myself. As a result of these experiences, I began to question the purpose of my life, and it was at this time that I decided to become a social worker.

### *Earth as Common Denominator*

Given my early childhood experiences and my early employment as a camp counselor, it was no surprise that my first job as a social worker was working with troubled teens in a wilderness setting. This was a difficult job that challenged me at many different levels. The wilderness setting offered an excellent place in which to work with youth who were struggling with "issues" in their lives. I found it much easier to work in a mountain meadow than within the confines of a four-walled office. In my experience the teens were much more open to engaging in a relationship with me and more willing to address the emotional and psychological challenges that they were facing. Working in a wilderness setting helped to create an environment where there seemed to be more common ground between the youths and myself. The barriers that existed in the city did not seem to exist in the wilderness.

While I was leading a group of youths on an overnight ski trip, two of the participants skiing behind me began to quarrel. It had been a long day, and everyone was tired and hungry. When I came up to the two boys who were quarrelling, I took off my skis and walked toward the individual who I assumed was the instigator of the argument. My plan was to confront him verbally, but as I approached him the snow beneath me gave away and I sank to my waist in the snow. I was in front of the boy I had hoped to confront, but found myself looking up at him. My head was now even with his waist! After a few moments we both began to laugh at this sudden turn of events. No longer was I the person "in charge"; I was a person just like everyone else, susceptible to the elements over which I had no control and challenged to cope with them. This was a humbling experience because it challenged the illusion of my power and made me realize that I had more in common with the youth than I dared to admit.

### *Voices in Nature*

As my career as a social worker continued, I eventually moved back to the city and worked in a wide variety of social work settings. The call of nature, however, was not far away. Later in my career I established a private counseling practice and began to work specifically with men, primarily with those who were facing relationship challenges in their personal lives. During the summer months I offered workshops entitled "Men, Relationship, and the Wilderness." During these workshops (which took place in an isolated setting), I attempted to draw upon the relationship that men had with nature as a therapeutic starting point to explore their relationships with significant others in their lives. This tended to be intensive emotional work. Rocks, trees, lakes, and streams became significant allies and sources of support for the men. While I engaged in this type of work, I began to realize how deeply intertwined the human-nature relationship is and the potential of this relationship for healing.

On one of these hikes I was supporting a participant in addressing his sadness related to his recent divorce. We had taken a break for lunch on a slope strewn with boulders. He was very upset and cried while he was sitting by a boulder beside the trail. While he was talking about his experience of sadness and loss, he turned towards the boulder and began a conversation with the rock, asking for its strength. This seemed to help and encouraged the other men to talk about their own vulnerabilities and experiences of loss. It also led to an important discussion related to what it means to be strong. From this point on the men began to look for other "voices in nature" that could help them in their emotional lives.

### *Loss and Grief in the Classroom*

As a social work educator I have struggled in my attempts to assist students in understanding the ecological perspective. Although the use of an ecological metaphor is helpful, students still struggle to grasp the notion that the people they serve must be seen in their social, political, and economic context. The ecological model itself seems to stop at the boundaries of the city and fails to take into context the "more-than-human" world in which we live. The notions of relationship, loss, suffering and healing, and meaning all seem to take place in a human-centered world. In many ways our identity as human beings and capacity to help has been limited by this anthropocentric tendency. Because nature has been relegated to the sidelines of their lives, students seem to lack the personal resources for understanding the dialectical relationship between their own lives and the world around them. This in turn makes it difficult for them to understand their clients' lives in this way as well.

In my experience in the classroom there are signs that exploring the human-nature relationship would be a worthwhile endeavor. I teach a community practice course, and in my first class I ask students to plan their ideal community. Although many of the ideal communities presented are different, they invariably have one common theme. The ideal communities that the students describe consistently have organic nature playing an important role. Descriptions of the ideal community come with beautiful pictures depicting the natural environment as integrated with the social community. When I ask students to compare their ideal community with the communities in which they currently live, my question is often met with silence. Eventually, the students begin to talk about their experience of feeling overwhelmed in response to what to do about the disparity between their ideal communities and the communities in which they live. They also talk about their grief and sadness related to the destruction of the natural environment. This classroom activity often leads students to explore their relationship with nature and helps them to understand how the quality of this relationship has an impact that reaches out into the world. They then begin to understand how their attitudes and values shape the natural environment and, in turn, how the state of the natural environment dialectically impacts them.

### *Preparing for Conversation*

My interest in engaging in dialogue with the research participants represents an integration between my personal and professional lives. Many of the most important learning experiences in my life have been in nature. As a young boy, I learned about the depth of my relationship with my father in the earth in which we worked together. A few years later I learned about the relationship between life and death from a crow I had befriended. As a young man my experiences in nature opened the world to me by provoking questions about who I was and what my purpose in life was. It was these experiences that led me to choose social work as a profession. In my initial experiences as a social worker I began to think about the role that nature plays in the healing process. I explored this interest in the private counseling practice I established by taking men out into nature for the explicit purpose of healing and relationship building. Now as a social work educator I want to continue this learning process that started many years ago. Recently, a number of social work educators have criticized the narrow and limited ecological view that the profession of social work has adopted. There is a growing interest in expanding our understanding of the role of nature in our lives and an attempt to overcome the profession's tendency to treat it as a benign backdrop in our lives. Considering my interest, my life experiences, and the challenges that the social work profession faces, it seems congruent and timely that I would want to study the concept of ecological identity.

I have shared my experiences and learning in nature to bring myself more into the realm of the ecological identity discourse, or, as Smith (1999b) suggested, into the "middle of things" (p. 45). The hermeneutic stance is critical of any notion that I can maintain an objective distance from my research topic. Smith succinctly stated, "I am always in what I am investigating, just as what I am investigating is somehow already in me even before I begin" (p. 46). In this regard it is important that my research effort be seen as a deeply intersubjective affair that is best understood through the experiences that I encountered with my research participants. Learning occurs when the crust of my day-to-day understanding is shaken to the point at which cracks appear and new understanding surfaces. This suggests that the very language, viewpoints, emotions, and so on that I bring to the research table must be open to further scrutiny and interpretation.

Facing the prospect of being changed is not an easy task. In my work as a social worker I have seen the human propensity to hang on to even the most difficult of situations to avoid the prospect of change. It would be incongruent (and arrogant) to think that I could avoid this tendency. I also understand, however, that the potential for change can increase if certain conditions exist. Courage is often necessary in facing change. This required that I allow my research efforts to be guided by the questions that emerged from the conversations. Even though acting in this way may cause anxiety, questions must be seen as a portal or invitation to further meaning. It was important that I resist the tendency to seek the security of definite answers that in an overall sense serve as roadblocks to further understanding and that I bring a particular humility to my conversations with the research participants. This required acknowledging that my ideas about my research topic are in fact not *my* ideas in that they have been created by the political, cultural, and linguistic traditions in which I live. This type of humility required acknowledging the essential role that the research participants played in the research endeavor. Because the hermeneutic endeavor is considered a highly intersubjective activity, the research participants and what they had to say were crucial to developing any new understanding of my research topic. New understanding can occur only when the hermeneutic circle becomes activated, which required that I come prepared to ask questions, listen intently to my research participants, and be open to the exciting possibility of change.

What follows are the process recordings of the conversations that I had with three social workers. I provide a brief description of the setting in which I interviewed each social worker, followed by the process recording of our two conversations. These process recordings encompass major excerpts from these conversations. I have deleted only material that I considered repetitive or social in nature; that is, introductions, brief discussions about our personal lives, or my initial instructions describing the research process. At the end of each pair of process recordings I present a brief summary of my experiences in the interviews. These summaries are entitled “Rough Ground,” which is drawn from the work of Joseph Dunne (1993) who borrowed the term from Ludwig

Wittgenstein and argued that coming to understanding is a highly practical endeavor that cannot be transcended by claiming any moral or objective stance). In Dunne's view, coming to understand a particular question or problem must be seen as an experience through which a person lives. Therefore I must be able to learn from my experience and adjust in ways that allow me to engage in research in an ethical, reflective, and context-sensitive manner.

## *Conversation as Lived*

### *Conversation #1 With Donald: Ecological Identity*

Donald and I met at his home. Because I have known him for quite some time, it was easy to develop an atmosphere of comfort. Our conversation took place in his kitchen, with Donald's dog lying on the kitchen floor beside us. Although Donald's primary occupation is as a therapist, he is also engaged in the vocational activity of growing and selling ginger. Donald is married, has three children, and lives in a housing co-operative. He can be described as a quiet, contemplative individual who brought a particular intensity to our conversations. On a number of occasions in both interviews his love for nature and commitment to clients was evident.

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | P: It takes a short time for me to overcome my nervousness and become comfortable with the digital recorder that is placed between Donald and I. After a bit of confusion in determining where our conversations should begin, Donald and I agree to start with the question, "Where does your ecological identity originate?" | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 2. | D: [pause] Well, I think mine has come out of solitary experience, solitary time, in natural settings—well, quasi natural settings. I think it began for me playing in the yard of my childhood home. It's a pretty small world from an adult point of view, and for a four-year-old, it was the whole universe and playing under the oak tree beside our house or playing in the sumac thicket in the back yard. It just seemed amongst these sumac bushes, which were probably—I don't know—two meters tall, and it was like a little forest for a little kid, and I would just sit back there and I'd lie down and just look up at the stalks and the leaves and the sky beyond it. [pause] I just knew—I couldn't put it into words, but I just knew that there was something completely different for me there that sort of touched me in a place that nothing else in my life did, and in a way that just sort of caused me to feel that everything was okay, no matter what else was going on in my life. At that age I hadn't yet gone to school, and my life is pretty good. But then when school started, my social life really being, well, difficult with bullying and teasing and so on. But in the face of all that, I still had this place of peacefulness. | The woods was a place of safety and meaning for a young boy, even though this meaning could not be put into words.<br>This experience was more intuitive and is based on being touched by something "different," which led to a feeling of contentment. |
| 3. | P: You mentioned that it was a secure and safe place and everything was going to be all right. | |
| 4. | D: Yes. This was [pause] like a physical place I can go to where things would be okay, and it was also something to hold on to internally when things weren't okay outside, when I was in the school yard and being bullied or tormented, being called a fag or a homo or beat up or whatever, right? Just kind of that memory of that place inside of me that, I think, really helped me to keep going. | The woods as a place of safety is also reflected by an internal place of safety as well. This experience helped Donald cope with what was happening in his life. |
| 5. | P: Is it that you have common interests, so to speak? If I protect nature, I'll be protected as well—is that the commonality? | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 6. | D: Well, I think that that is true on a species level, but I don't really believe that that is true in terms of my individual life in a functional sense. But certainly in terms of who I identify with, it's like my relatives. I feel more closely related to the trees across the road than I do to a lot of people that I meet. And [pause] just respecting coexistence. To me, that is one of the universal principles of most living organisms. Some humans accept it, right? is that there is an implied acceptance of coexistence. You don't see any other species actively exterminating their brothers and sisters, right? | Identification with the more-than-human world as a "relative" worthy of respect, equal to that of people in Donald's life.<br>His identification with nature leads to an experience of co-existence. |
| 7. | P: But it sounds like you're saying (and my experience is similar to yours) that idea of kinship, a commonality, a closeness | |
| 8. | D: Yes. Well, I certainly don't feel like I'm synonymous with other species. I know that in very important ways I am different, so it's not about fusion; it's about feeling related and differentiated from at the same time, when half the time of the year I couldn't survive outside for more than a short period of time without a tremendous amount of technology, right? | Relationship to nature is an experience of both differentiation and relatedness at the same time. |
| 9. | D: It's not like I am like a tree or a red squirrel or a bohemian waxwing; I'm not. But nonetheless I [pause]—I don't know how else to put it than trying to reach beyond, just kind of using clichéd words all the time. It's kind of like the case of, you know how you go to a family reunion, and there are all these people that you are closely related to by blood that you kind of wish that you weren't? | Difficult to find the words to describe this relationship; it involves a reaching beyond words. |
| 10. | D: And there are these distantly related cousins that you really wish you were more closely connected to but aren't. | |
| 11. | D: That's sort of the feeling I—that's a metaphor I can use to describe how I feel about nature, because I know I'm very different, and I'm very in some ways apart from it. And I desire a closer connection to those more distant relatives than I do to some of my closer relatives. | There is more of a desire to connect with the world of trees and birds than with humans. |
| 12. | P: "Is it a longing, or calling, or neither?" | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 13. | D: [pause] Well, it's not that I don't feel longings or callings, but in this instance, no, it's more just sort of a [pause]—my experience is that it's always there, the possibility of feeling really connected to nature is always there, and it's just a matter of me slowing down enough and settling into a place long enough to experience it. | The more-than-human world is always there waiting, slowing down, paying attention, helping Donald to experience it. |
| 14. | D: If you go into the bush and if you're always moving around, the organisms that live there stay pretty much hidden and unobservable, at least animals and birds. But if you sit down and just are quiet for an hour, all of a sudden the life of the community emerges around you, and it becomes visible, right? | Given these conditions, a community of life emerges. |
| 15. | P: I share some ideas related to ecological identity and then invite Donald to share what this concept means to him. | |
| 16. | D: And ecological identity, well, I think, well, that's what I carry inside of myself derived from my experience in nature, right? | Ecological identity emerges from experience in nature. |
| 17. | D: [pause] And maybe that partly has to do with personal temperament, where you position that. By being a very introverted person, I think a lot of that formation happens inside of me, that sort of distillation process, right? Who I am in relationship to nature. | The temperament of a person has an influence on how an ecological identity is located/determined. |
| 18. | D: [pause] I think how that happens also varies according to the environment. If I'm hiking in the mountains, I feel more, because of the fragility of that ecosystem, I feel much more like a temporary sort of visitor to that place, out of respect to the needs of that ecology. I preferably walk only along a given trail, right? so you're not damaging the alpine plants. And so it feels like my physical relationship is much more circumscribed there, and I feel more, like I said, as a visitor to a very sort of special place, and that's fine; I think that's necessary, and that's part of the respecting—I think the rights of those alpine plants to grow is more important than my right to walk wherever I want, for example, right? | Behavior is determined through a particular understanding of his environment—an environment that has intrinsic rights that supersede Donald's.<br>In this regard, Donald understands himself as a "temporary visitor." |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 19. | D: And what's interesting is that, at the same time, I think the effect of being in those places is more profound upon my internal life in the sense that I carry within my memory the experience of being there very vividly and powerfully through the whole year, and it fuels me, right? Carries me. In contrast, gardening—growing ginger, for example—is physically more interactive. I can walk wherever I want in my garden, and I'm down on my hands and knees and digging in the dirt and shoveling and so on. And I spend a lot more time in my garden than I do in the mountains, and so in that sense it's a more frequent and kind of carnal activity, more physical activity, right? | Identity experiences in nature are stored in memory and serve as a source of support and life energy.<br>But these experiences require a certain way of behaving that have restrictions that may not apply to his work in his garden. |
| 20. | D: And while that's important to me—I think it's very important to me—I think it touches me in a different place than walking on a trail in the mountains does. They both kind of feed my ecological identity, but in quite different ways. And perhaps the gardening is less intense because it's more contrived; it's a complete manipulation of growing organisms, right?— | Different environments play different roles in determining an ecological identity.<br>Donald's experience in the wilderness is more intense than that in his garden. |
| 21. | D: —whereas walking on the Skyline Trail is—you are there as a visitor, and everything that you see is by some design. And I think that's much more powerful in terms of a formative influence upon my ecological identity because I am a visitor to something that has created itself, right? | The experience of being a guest in or visitor to an environment that has created itself can be very powerful. |
| 22. | P: It sounds like more for you that identity is an experience that you have and that you carry with you? | |
| 23. | D: Yes. Yes, I can't say that I analyze it very much, right? It's kind of like, have you ever been to a fantastic concert, right? | Ecological identity is an experience first and foremost. |
| 24. | D: And you know when you're there that this is very special, right? | This experience is seen as being special. |
| 25. | D: —just by the power of the impressions, and you just soak it up as much as you possibly can, right?— | The power of impression affects Donald. |
| 26. | D: —more or less. Walking on a trail in the mountains is like that for me: I just try to absorb as much as I can of what I see and the smells and the sounds and all the physicality of it, right? | Experience in these surroundings is an intensely physical experience. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 27. | D: I just connected with—this may seem a bit bizarre, but I do think it's related. What are the requirements for a good sexual experience, right? One, you have to be able to relax, right? You have to be able to enjoy your body, right? And you have to be able to focus on what's happening now, right? And I think the same thing is true for a great experience with nature, right? | The conditions of building a relationship with nature include being relaxed, enjoying bodily experiences, and focusing on the present. |
| 28. | P: I think of Joanna Macy's work, Earth as Lover, . . . so it's a sensual experience? | |
| 29. | D: Yes, completely, yes. [pause] It's a devotion of attention, right? On that last hike that we went on, when I was laying down on the forest floor beside the trail, right? There was this absolutely beautiful micro community of plants, of bearberry and various kinds of lichen and sphagnum moss mixed in with needles, and in a square foot it was like this most fantastic piece of artwork, right? And I just wanted to see that and [pause]—yes, I just wanted to completely devote my attention to that for even just a few minutes. [pause] And I feel sad about that because I believe that virtually any sort of natural place like that is far more beautiful and precious than anything that we have created as humans, and yet it's not valued. It's trampled upon, it's destroyed, and I just feel heartbroken about that. | A devotion to attention is needed to experience the absolute beauty of nature. This experience is accompanied with feelings of sadness. |
| 30. | D: And people go to these great art galleries in New York City or London or Paris, and these paintings exchange hands for a few million dollars. And if you really look at them, well, they're pretty good, right? But compared to what was growing on that square foot on the forest floor beside the trail, it's nothing. | The beauty of nature transcends the beauty created by human hands. |
| 31. | P: Yes. Well, with the art it's always contextual. This particular art is good this year, and this particular art looks good the next year. It's kind of so still anthropocentric: It's us determining the worth of— | |
| 32. | D: And it's all derivative, right? | Human art is derived. |
| 33. | D: All art is second, third, fourth, fifth hand nature, right? And yet we do not worship and praise the original. | Nature is the original form of beauty. |
| 34. | P: I bring forward the word *blasphemy*. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 35. | D: [pause] Yes, I think it's very painful to feel closely related to something which is [pause], which is fragmenting, which has been trampled on, which shows no sign of recovering in the foreseeable future, right? [pause] I think it's kind of like Mother Theresa and her devotion and dedication to the destitute people in Bombay and Delhi or wherever it is that she lives and works, right? Her work must be full of grief, right? And I imagine that people who love nature feel something similar. | Having an ecological identity means working from a place of grief.<br>It is painful to develop an ecological identity because what we love is being abused and its potential to live threatened. |
| 36. | P: But is it something in your life that comes and goes? Or it's always there, but our lives take us away from it . . . . How do we live it? Or live with it, or live in it? | |
| 37. | D: Well, I think it's a bit like a fire that burns inside, and sometimes the flames are high, and sometimes there's just small coals that are smoldering. And when the fire is burning higher, then I bring a lot more energy to my human relationships, both family and work and friends. And the longer I'm away from it, the more depleted I am and, I think, the less I have to give. | The experience of ecological identity has ebbs and flows, and when it is most prevalent, it leads to more energy for family, work, and friends. |
| 38. | D: [pause] I think it's sort of a measure of a meaningfulness within me, and the more recently I have been in direct contact with nature, the more meaningful my existence feels to me, and therefore the more energized I am. | The more intimate contact with nature, the more meaning in Donald's life, the more energy he has. |
| 39. | D: I think it has a bit also to do with hopefulness. The more my hopefulness is replenished—although I have to say that, overall, I don't feel particularly hopeful about our relationship as a species of nature, but it's kind of an irrational hopefulness, I suppose, when I come back from the mountains or I've worked half a day in my garden. I just irrationally feel more hopeful. | Hope emerges from direct contact with nature because it yields a particular meaning that allows him to go on. |
| 40. | D: [pause] Perhaps I'm reminded of what's really important to me, and everything else seems a little more, well, just certainly in context. | Experiences in nature help to put life into perspective. |
| 41. | D: Mm-hmm. I think I'm reminded of the fact that whatever my sort of small troubles are, or even whatever the huge troubles in the world, that eventually, whatever happens, nature will continue; and the tumult of life in the soils will continue, and forests will come back, and the rivers will once again flow clean and be full of salmon. No matter what we do, we cannot destroy nature, and I think that's ultimately reassuring for me. | The enduring quality of nature provides a particular security.<br>There is a strong belief in nature's ability to restore and rejuvenate itself, and this will persevere over any human effort. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 42. | P: A sense of yourself that that too will be you? Do you know what I mean? Or that you are part of that kind of ongoing—?" | |
| 43. | D: Well, I assume that when I die I will dissipate, and my atoms and molecules will disperse into the world, but I'll be a tiny drop in the Pacific Ocean. It's not like there'll be any trace left of me . . . . I see myself as a fleeting bit of matter. | Death is dissipation into the smallest pieces of matter that make up the world. |
| 44. | P: I suggest to Donald that his experience in nature is received. | |
| 45. | D: I think it is like a musical instrument. | |
| 46. | D: Just like when a piano is built or a violin is built, it's built to certain specifications based on the musical traditions of the culture, right? You don't build a violin any old way; it's built a very particular way so it has the potential to make a certain sound. And I think all life is like that: It's built in a certain way so that it has the potential to carry a tune, a particular tune, that's characteristic of that species. And so when it's born, in its very design it carries the tradition of a species, right? which is a minor tradition of the larger tradition of life. And so it has the possibility to carry the tune, and if it's properly nurtured, like me as a baby, as a child, I'm properly nurtured, then I can carry sort of the tune of what it means to be human. But I can also possibly resonate with the larger sort of melody of life, right? So I think, yes, it comes from outside, but the potential is built into every living thing to sort of in a harmonious way carry the larger tune. | The human organism, through its construction and the worldly design in which it is embedded, can enact cultural potential as well as a more earthly tune.<br>Our ability to respond to this "earthly tune" is dependent upon our ability to receive it. This ability to receive is in part determined by how we are raised and nurtured. |
| 47. | D: I think of it like a musical instrument. | |
| 48. | D: It's received both in the design and also in the construction, right? | |

### *Conversation #2 With Donald: Implications for Practice*

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 1. | P: Donald and I briefly review our last interview and discuss the challenge of making sure the academic pursuit of understanding ecological identity should not interfere with the challenge of understanding the experience of ecological identity. In regards to this I say, ." . . And I'm coming from this, I've read all this and almost wanting to get it confirmed, or try to figure it out. And what you have said to me is, it's experience, and you don't analyze it as much. We begin to talk about nature of the ecological identity experience." | |
| 2. | D: Or it's also a cumulative thing. You don't develop a relationship with nature by going out and spending a day backpacking or canoeing for the first time; there's a history to the relationship, right? | |
| 3. | D: And I think the same is true of a person's relationship with the natural world: It has to have a history, and somebody who lives in the city all the time and very occasionally gets out into nature is only going to have an acquaintance with nature; there's not going to be a deep friendship. | Our relationship with the natural world is cumulative and requires an historical context to facilitate deeper meaning. |
| 4. | P: Yes. I think of—and our society is like that too. It's a kind of eco-tourism, this kind of plopping in and out, and it's a commodity, and it's not in a relationship. | |
| 5. | D: No. And I guess that's the danger of urban culture, is that people less and less have any kind of personal history with nature. | A loss of history with nature is a loss of relationship with nature. |
| 6. | P: So how do you sustain that relationship? | |
| 7. | D: Well, by being faithful to it. Again, I think there's lots of parallels with a human-to-human relationship, right? | A sustained relationship with nature requires being faithful. |
| 8. | D: How do you sustain your marriage? Not by ignoring it, not by taking it for granted, not by having an affair. | The notion of fidelity to nature also surfaces here. |
| 9. | D: By being faithful to it and by making it a priority in your life. And so in practical terms I think that means paying attention to it on a daily basis. And that may be something as small as just really paying attention to a tree that's growing in your front yard, right? | Faithfulness means paying attention on a daily basis and not ignoring or taking for granted what is in our own "front yard." |
| 10. | D: I really think it's got to be a daily part of your life. [pause] | Our faithfulness and fidelity to nature and our appreciation for nature should occur on a daily basis. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 11. | P: Do you see your wife differently in the context, or your family? When I come back from a hike I see my family differently. I'm more open; there's more meaning to me. I see them as part of it and sharing it with me—do you know?" | |
| 12. | D: Well, when I come back from let's say a backpacking trip, for example [pause], I'm not sure I see my family differently, or it's not that I see them as being different. I think I probably see them more clearly for who they are because I am more receptive. It's like I have been tuned by being in nature; that's what it sort of feels like, because you know how you take a tuning fork and you tune a guitar to it, right? | Being "tuned" by nature allows Donald to be more receptive in seeing his family more for who they are. |
| 13. | D: It sort of feels like that, that my inner life has been tuned by being in nature. And when I'm in tune, then I can sort of see more clearly and thereby perceive my family more clearly for who they are. That's how it feels. And I think that when I'm tuned, I'm better in everything that I do, that I'm clearer, more effective, just generally more life generative in all of my relationships. | Donald's experience in nature helps him to develop a particular sensitivity to the world around him. This sensitivity or clarity emerges within his experiences in nature.<br>Although it is an internal experience, it impacts him externally in how he perceives and relates to others. |
| 14. | P: So you bring that to the people you work with and does that tuning help you when you bring that? | |
| 15. | D: Mm-hmm. Well, I'm convinced it does, but I can't provide any objective proof of that. But I think that I am better as a therapist when I'm tuned, because I'm just generally happier, more energetic, less reactive, I think more compassionate, maybe on occasion a bit wiser, and, I think, a more beneficial factor in my clients' lives. So in that sort of general sense, I think that it definitely does aid my work. | Experiences in nature can help Donald in his work with clients. He views himself as more compassionate and perhaps wiser as a result of these experiences. |
| 16. | But I'm also trying to figure out how to then in a more explicit fashion bring the centrality of nature in my life into my work, and that's by no means a finished project. I feel like I'm really just trying to take it to the next stage, and I'm not yet sure what that's going to look like. But I feel like for myself that it's really important because I don't have the integration between my pastoral counseling and my love of nature that I want. | Bringing the centrality of nature in his life to his work is an ongoing project. Donald described this as an integration process between his love for nature and his work as a therapist. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 17. | P: I think about maybe talking to people about their relationship to nature, if anything, just as a metaphor for intimacy or—and where do they get meaning? | |
| 18. | D: Right. And one of the things I've noticed interesting in my work with clients is that I think that I see indications that nature's more important to them than they realize. And one of the indicators of that to me is that an exercise that I do with most people I work with at some point is like a safe place, an imaginary exercise, where I've asked them to choose a place in their mind where they have actually been or would like to have been where they can feel at peace and safe and ________, and about eighty percent of people spontaneously go to an image of being in nature. And these are average urban people, right? who spend their lives pretty much in the city and don't in any explicit way make nature a priority or recognize it as being central to their belief systems, right? | Donald noticed that nature is often more important to the clients themselves than they initially realize.<br>People who are highly urbanized still have an image of nature that orientates them to the world. |
| 19. | D: And yet a very large majority choose nature as a place of comfort and sustenance. So I think it's there, at least on an unconscious level, for most people. And maybe, therefore, part of my work is to help people to recognize why it is already important to them at that subconscious level. and once they recognize that, then, okay, then, how then should you be living your life? | Many people have an image of nature to which they can turn for safety, support, and comfort.<br>The role of the therapist is to bring this to the client's awareness to use it as a guide to the way that they live their lives. |
| 20. | P: But I remember you saying, and I thought it was—"the personal is ecological." | |
| 21. | D: Right, right, right. Yes, well, I find that question, Where is the political in all this?—somehow I question—and maybe that individual was just trying to state the obvious: that it is political. But then maybe, on the other hand, maybe they don't see it. And to me, everything about it is political because it's about justice; it's about recognizing what is important, what is valuable, and therefore, how should we live our lives, right? And that's very political. It's saying that there is something seriously wrong with the way we've organized ourselves and that it has to change. So I see it as being completely political and not separate from it in any sense. | Working within this framework is a political activity because it involves the concept of justice and challenges the way that we are living our lives. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 22. | D: We're all tied into the same web of life, and whether it's the quality of the air or the water that we're drinking or the well-being of grizzly bears in the national parks, if one end of the web of life gets pulled, we all get tugged by that, right? | Our behavior and the way that we live our lives affects others, both human and nonhuman. |
| 23. | D: And we're all related, and we share the same presence and future. | Our kinship with others is based on a shared present and a shared future. |
| 24. | P: So when you're working with clients, do you think that way at all—what's happening, how they are able to walk in their—? | |
| 25. | D: [pause] Well, when I see people at work, it's layers is what I experience; or, if you want, a kind of depth. It's like there are all these dimensions, right? to a person. When I meet them at work, it's like I meet them on the front doorstep of their house, right? And if I'm lucky in the first session, then they'd open the front door, right? And we might talk on the threshold of their house. And if work goes well, they might invite me into their living room, and we visit there for a long time. And then maybe they'll see me to the door, and that'll be the end of it. Or maybe they'll have me over for supper. And, of course, with every person it's different. But yes, it's like there are layers or depths of a person, and I always assume that there's lots of it I'll never know; and if I'm lucky, more that I will know about them, right? So I have that sort of spatial sense of the person and an assumption that—I assume that they're like me, I guess, in that I have all these different rooms to my self, and I only show most of them to a few people, right? | Donald used the metaphor of a house to describe the multidimensional nature of his clients' lives. He viewed helping as being invited to their house and being given the opportunity to explore each "room" of the house once trust has been built.<br>His work involves an uncovering, but it requires trust and an invitation from his clients.<br>Understanding a client is never complete. They have unique ways of presenting themselves. |
| 26. | D: Yes, although the place I'm really interested in going to is in the basement. [laughter] But not many people let me there, and that's what I really—I think it's what's in their basements that's—well, for me anyway—is most interesting because it's where things make the least sense logically, but I think are most revealing in terms of who we really are. | Donald's work is most productive when he explores in a metaphoric sense the client's "basement."<br>This is the place within them that clients have the most difficult time expressing because of its illogical character. |
| 27. | P: Hmm, basements: kind of cold and dark or— | |
| 28. | D: Yes, hidden away, secretive, stuff that we're most fearful of revealing, of showing, right? But I think potentially is also the most liberating. | There is fear associated with these feelings and thoughts. |
| 29. | P: Like intense feelings of anger or shame or— | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 30. | D: Yes, that's usually where we pack away all our hurts and all the distorted forms that those will take over time if kept hidden away. | Trauma and hurt from the past are hidden and if not expressed take on a distorted form. |
| 31. | P: And if you're invited into the basement, what do you do in there as a helper? Or do you do anything? | |
| 32. | D: Well, it's kind of like going into nature: I'm a visitor, right? | Entering the person's house is like entering nature: You are a visitor. |
| 33. | D: And I usually just sit there and talk and notice and try not to take things for granted. | As a visitor, you respond by taking notice and not taking what you see for granted. |
| 34. | P: Don't take things for granted or—? | |
| 35. | D: No. Yes, I mean in terms of being careful not to make assumptions or— | It is also important to keep an open mind. |
| 36. | P: Trample on anything. | |
| 37. | D: Yes, yes, stay on the trail. But pay very careful attention to what's going on around me. | "Stay on the trail" suggests a protocol to your behavior. |
| 38. | P: What's going on around you— | |
| 39. | D: In their environment, right? in their psychic environment. | Paying attention to our psychic environment—understanding it in its place. |
| 40. | P: After this discussion I offer an experience in my own work as a therapist. I describe a time when I was working with a client and felt that we had accomplished some important "basement work." I share with Donald, "So the basement got cleaned out; that was what a client was saying, but also that he felt like a wind had blown through him. And I don't know; I thought that was a lovely metaphor." | |
| 41. | D: Yes, yes. Yes, well, looking for how what we can learn from nature might apply to therapy. I think that one of the universal principles of nature is that everything changes, and everything moves, and everything is connected by cycles, right? | The universal principles of nature are inherent in our own lives. There is a particular dynamicism prevalent in our world. |
| 42. | D: And personal chronic illness and disease in people, whether it's physical or psychological, happens when that universal principle of nature is blocked, right? And so people, in the case of psychological harm, they are hurt by something in their lives, and because they don't have the resources to facilitate their own healing, they pack it away in the basement, right? | The universal principles of movement, change, and connection are thwarted when we experience psychological harm. When we do not have resources, this trauma becomes relocated to the deepest part of ourselves. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 43. | D: And yes, so your being invited into that person's basement makes it possible for them to kind of, in a sense, reconnect with nature in that this has to be brought out of the basement and allowed to heal and be transformed and— | Healing involves a process of reconnecting with our deepest selves so that we can heal and experience our external world more fully. |
| 44. | P: To the sunlight, so to speak [laughs] | |
| 45. | D: Yes, the pressure and everything, yes. | |
| 46. | P: If you talk about it, it keeps it moving. But I think it's *more* important to just watch and participate in it by asking questions and not necessarily—and staying in the experience and not stepping out [laughs] and transcending it by— | |
| 47, | D: But I think that—I'm not sure if this is exactly what you're referring to—but I think interpretation, which is often very tempting to prove how clever I am, is a mistake during therapy. I voluntarily felt better for it because I've demonstrated my superior intelligence. | Clients' experiences are often interpreted more for the therapist than for the client. In a way it involves overstepping our role of visitor. |
| 48. | D: Yes. But I can't say it's ever helped the person I'm talking to, so I've tried to get away from that. But I do think that there are times when it is helpful and maybe necessary to be very clear about what is or isn't a good idea, but also to clarify that your support for the person isn't conditional upon an agreement here. Just, it's that I thought, A lot of people get into trouble because they lacked for appropriate guidance growing up, right? | Guidance plays an important role in the helping effort. |
| 49. | D: It's not just absence of nurturance, but also absence of leadership and guidance that a lot of people suffer from. So I think that there is a place sometimes inherently for giving some, say, moral grounding or guidance about what's advisable in a particular situation. | Donald suggested that providing some moral grounding is part of the guiding process. |
| 50. | P: [pause]And even people who we help when their identity becomes static, that's when there's problems: "I'm this way." And they don't sense that ever changing, almost being reshaped. | |
| 51. | D: [pause] Yes. And rigidity, I think, would be another symptom of being alienated from nature, right? Because nature isn't rigid. | Rigidity in regards to holding on to our identity alienates us from our nature.. |
| 52. | D: It's dynamic. | |
| 53. | D: And people who become rigid in their lives are estranged from that principle. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 54. | P: What role does the body play in all this? I'm just thinking about rigidity, and this'd go back to that instrument that you talked about, that ability to be tuned and— | |
| 55. | D: Well, to be honest, Peter, I have a problem with the question— | |
| 56. | D: —with the whole idea of the body— | |
| 57. | D: —because it presumes separateness. | Discussing *the* body suggests separateness. |
| 58. | D: I don't think the body exists. | A separate body does not exist. |
| 59. | D: [pause] We have an idea that we call the body, right? | The body considered separately is an idea. |
| 60. | D: But show me a body separate from everything else, and what is it? It's a corpse, right? And I'm assuming you're referring to a living body. | A body not in relation is a corpse. |
| 61. | P: Well, I'm just thinking about, we talked about the rigidity and that the rigidity is held in the body. | |
| 62. | D: And not just the body; it's in the whole self. | Rigidity does not apply to the body alone; it permeates the entire self—our thoughts, emotions, and the way we perceive things. |
| 63. | D: Show me a person whose body is rigid and who is psychologically flexible. | The sense of our body and self as integrated. |
| 64. | D: Right? I think you'd be hard pressed to find such a person. | |
| 65. | P: It's a conduit; it's representative of that energy and needs conditions to allow it to that and express itself. And I wondered, in your work, do you talk about that or not? Do you kind of—not to single it out, but pay attention to it. | |
| 66. | D: So yes, I think it's absolutely essential as a practitioner who emphasizes the psychological that I pay attention to their physical experience, yes, because if I don't—this is a tangential thought, but I was thinking that I'm giving you a hard time about the idea of the body, and I think there's a parallel process in our perception and in our sort of reductionist view of the world. And we talk about the world only as essentially a global body, right? | Our dualistic notions about our bodies are inherent in our views about the world as well. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 67. | D: —that it's actually a living organism with probably a psychology and a spirit and maybe even thought patterns. Who knows, right? | The view of the world as "body" is also limited if it does not include the possibility of also encompassing spirit, thought, and so on. |
| 68. | D: But the danger of thinking of our physical selves as the body and the world as a big piece of rock are kind of reinforcing, ________ reinforcing illusions that are dangerous, because, for example, we see all the evidence of people who treat their physical self as the body, right? They go to the gym, and they work out on those absurd machines, and they do all these things that are symptomatic of treating their body like their car, right? | Objectifying our bodies emerges within the same thinking that leads us to objectify the world. |
| 69. | D: But there's no integration between their physical activity and their spiritual life or their personal relationships with nature or anything else. It's ________. So I think that's something that we have to be wary of, because we live in a culture that teaches us that all the time, right?— | Our physical and spiritual lives need to reintegrate with our relationship to nature. |
| 70. | P: So part of your role though then is to help people reintegrate? | |
| 71. | D: Well definitely. | |
| 72. | D: Yes, it is. It's endemic in our culture and our personal awareness of it. | |
| 73. | One of my favorite phrases to talk about this difficulty is *dissociation*, because it refers directly to loss of relationship, and it's usually used to refer in terms of your internal psychological state. But it also applies very well to our ecological relationships. Yes, we're dissociated from our bodies, from our emotions, from people in our lives, and also from the world of nature; and these are not coincidental problems. | Dissociation from our bodies, emotions, people in our lives, and the world of nature, which are deeply intertwined. |
| 74. | D: [pause] So looking for connections between my relationship with nature and my work, I could sum it up, I think by saying it's about rebuilding associations on all those levels. | Initiating the process of integration means overcoming the dissociation (lack of relationships) in our lives. We can do this by looking for connections or associations. |

***Rough ground.*** In a hermeneutic sense, engaging in a meaning-making endeavor does not imply that it is an easy task. My conversation with Donald reflected this reality. It was obvious that he was fully present and affected by our conversation. I too was fully engaged, and as our conversations progressed, I became completely immersed in our discussion. In the initial interview I started in an awkward manner. I asked Donald to describe what ecological identity meant to him. This was confusing for him, and after a brief discussion I asked him to talk about his experiences that have led to his ecological identity. This was much easier, and he began to talk about his experiences as a young boy. I quickly realized that asking the first question actually "intellectualized" my topic and in many ways created a certain distance between Donald and what I was hoping he would discuss. When I asked him about his experiences that led to his ecological identity, our conversation became more immediate and more authentic.

Although Donald's emotion and tears in the first interview did not surprise me, I was still challenged by them. I initially struggled with how to respond, but quickly decided that the first thing to do would be to acknowledge them and allow him the time to experience his emotions. What was most difficult for me was to acknowledge my own feelings that surfaced as a result of Donald's display of emotions. I empathized with his apparent feelings of sadness and wondered whether he was grieving for the loss of not only the natural habitat, but also his experiences related to his boyhood trauma as well. Although I did not share this with Donald, I felt a particular sadness throughout the duration of our interview. I was empathizing with Donald, but perhaps similarly, I was grieving for my own personal losses.

I was also challenged by Donald's relationship to nature in general. Perhaps because of my own early experiences with Catholicism, I have tended to engage in the process of transcending above and beyond my experience in nature. Donald, however, was not prone to doing this. He seemed much more able to hold what Naess (personal communication, November 19, 1996) called a "steadfast nearness" to the surroundings in the alpine meadow that he so articulately described. He neither transcended the experience nor retreated into a "shell" of intellectualization. He was just there, neither separate nor differentiated. This was difficult for me to grasp and caused some dissonance for me. I fumbled with my words and initially asked questions that were somewhat confusing. Eventually, however, I began to understand that my confusion actually presented an opportunity to venture into a realm of new meaning and understanding.

Donald was very clear in describing his relationship to nature. He emphasized the importance of having a personal relationship with nature that extends over a period of time. He also argued that our relationship with nature requires a particular devotion that needs to be present in our daily lives. Donald was also very clear in describing his experience in nature. He talked about ecological identity as an internal experience that surfaced as a result of his time in nature. He described this experience through feelings of coexistence and kinship. I found Donald's preference for kinship with animals rather than with people very challenging. I was also interested in his comment that this preference was precipitated by a claim or invitation that was, in his view, always present and available to him.

Donald also made a distinction between his experience in the wilderness and his experiences of working in his garden. I was struck by his description of his experience in the wilderness when he described the impact upon him as we walked through and observed the beautiful sights of an alpine meadow. He described his experience of feeling like a visitor who was walking on a canvas of original art. In the wilderness he was tentative, respectful, and appreciative of the fragile beauty that surrounded him. On the other hand, Donald described a more carnal experience in his garden, where he is allowed to become physically interactive with the soil and plants.

Donald's description of his work with clients was also very interesting. I found his comments related to how his experience in nature has helped to "tune him" in a way that allows him to see others in a more compassionate and caring manner very compelling. He tentatively described his experiences in nature as a source of wisdom. I was also surprised by Donald's point about how many of his clients described internalized scenes and experiences in nature as potential sources of meaning and emotional safety in their lives. As he worked with clients, Donald asked them to talk about their relationship with nature as a source of meaning or potential meaning in their lives. I was fascinated with Donald's use of the metaphor of a house to describe his clients as well. In this regard using the metaphor of a house has helped to bring forward the notion of space, which in turn has helped him to clearly articulate his work with clients. I also appreciated his comments about how, when he moves through these personal spaces, he acts like a visitor (similarly to how he behaves in an alpine meadow).

Perhaps the most challenging time in my interview with Donald occurred when I asked him to elaborate upon his understanding of the role that our bodies play in the helping process. He responded quickly to my use of the words "the body" and argued that my description assumed a separation between body and mind that was misleading and inappropriate. Donald went on to describe a more holistic understanding of the body-mind continuum and brought up the notion of disease as a form of disassociation. Although I was surprised by Donald's quick response to my question and apparent frustration with how I had posed my question, I appreciated his response and felt that his notion of disassociation could certainly be explored in much more depth. I also understood Donald's reaction as an example of how the limits of language constrain our ability to discuss certain concepts; in particular, those that are nondualistic in nature.

### *Conversation #1 With Rena: Ecological Identity*

Rena is an Aboriginal woman who has been practicing social work for approximately 15 years. She currently works in a small community in the Northwest Territories in a number of social-work related activities. In addition to working as a counselor in a social service agency, she is also involved in offering workshops for women that involve "healing on the land." Rena has been learning from the teachings of an Elder who plays an important role in her life. Recently, however, she has been conducting these healing workshops on her own. These activities occur in a remote wilderness setting and take place over several days. Rena also travels throughout the north and runs talking circles for women who are interested in this type of personal work.

I interviewed Rena in her home. It was a very quiet and relaxed setting. We sat on different ends of her couch with the microphone between us. Rena was very easy to talk to. She was very patient with my questions and took her time to answer them in a very thoughtful and clear way. As our conversation progressed we became more relaxed, and our conversation went more smoothly. Throughout I sensed that Rena believed deeply in the work that she was doing and was eager to share her learning with me. It also became evident that Rena had learned a great deal from the Elder and had integrated the Elder's teaching into both her personal and her professional life.

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 1. | During our pilot interview the concept of sacrifice surfaced in relation to a fasting ceremony that Rena and others participate in, and I decided to ask her for further clarification.<br>P: I'm interested in that concept of sacrifice. The reason why I'm interested is because it has a history in Western tradition too, but I think it's a bit different. But I'd just like to know—it was the sacrifice of giving up something, the food and the water and that—but if you could just say a little bit about that. | |
| 2. | R: And so you have to understand that in our belief system, to receive something, you always have to give something. There always has to be an exchange. So if I am going to take medicines from the land, I put tobacco there. I give something to the land so that I can take it. | Whatever a person receives from the earth must be seen within the context of relationship. If we hope to receive something from the earth, we must also be prepared to give something. This offering is made symbolically by giving tobacco. |
| 3. | R: So there has to be an exchange for it to be right, for it to work. So if I want to receive something— | An exchange is involved; the offering is presented prior to anything being received. |
| 4. | R: —then I need to give something. And so that's the concept of the sacrifice and why it's important. And so when we are participating in a ceremony like the fasting, a spiritual fast, the sacrifice is giving up our live, what keeps us alive. So in one way it's the greatest sacrifice we can actually give without giving our life. | Giving up food and water during a fast is a symbolic form of giving up our own lives.<br>The sacrifice of giving up our lives actually allows us to keep on living. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 5. | R: It's our ability to be alive. So by giving up food and water, we're giving up our life, because we're asking for something, because while we're there, we're praying. We're asking for things from the Creator, but we're also asking our ancestors in the spirit world, the grandmothers and grandfathers. We're asking them for help. And so that's part of the exchange that happens | Giving up our lives by giving up food and water can be seen as a form of prayer and a way of asking for something. Giving up our lives can be seen as asking for help. |
| 6. | P: And part of it is a symbol in the tobacco of giving. | |
| 7. | P: And part of it is in the taking away some of the sustenance of life, to give your life. | |
| 8. | R: Right, and to receive a new life. So what we believe is that when we come down from that mountain, we will have a new life. We will be new. We will be reborn in a way. | Our gift is a new life. We become reborn in a sense. |
| 9. | R: Clean, cleansed. | Purification is involved. |
| 10. | R: And freed of burdens and other things that we had that we really didn't need and wasn't useful to us any more. We let those go there. | We let go of the things in our lives that we do not need and are not helpful to us. |
| 11. | P: Okay. So it's almost kind of like a shedding of a skin kind of? | |
| 12. | R: Absolutely, yes. Mm-hmm. And so when we get to the top of the mountain and we start in that sacred part of the ceremony where we stay in one spot, we're giving up water, we're giving up food, but we have it right in front of us, right there the whole time. We take food, we take water up the mountain with us. And then we put it in front of us, and we sit there, and we pray for those four days with that food and that water right there within reach. Any second I could change my mind and take that water and drink it— | Having the food and water right before her enhances the experience of sacrifice and the experience of giving something up. |
| 13. | R: —if I want to—if I choose to. And then on the last day before they come to take us back to the physical world——because in a way it's like we're in our spirit time or our spirit life; we're starting to move closer to the spirit world than we are really in the physical world. | Ontologically, there is movement from the physical world to the spirit part of her life. |
| 14. | R: So when they come to take us back to the physical world, we take that food and we take that water, and we give that food to the land. We know the animals are going to come once we're gone, and that's going to be an offering for them for different things for allowing us to be in their territory for that time. And we give the water to Mother Earth. | Back in the physical world an important offering is made to the animals that surround the fasting site to thank them for sharing their territory. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 15. | R: And let me tell you, after four days of no water, that is the biggest gift you could ever give, is to put that water in Mother Earth instead of drinking it. So that's our sacrifice, and that's our exchange. | The ritual of giving the water is intensified because of the sacrifice of not drinking the water themselves. This punctuates the exchange between those who are fasting and "Mother Earth." |
| 16. | P: Right. And the food being there and your not touching it, that's the symbol of the sacrifice that you're giving. | |
| 17. | P: And so in a way your relationship to the food and that all changed too. Well, you talked about that yesterday. | |
| 18. | P: Or you see how precious it is. And then you give it back to the earth. Okay. | |
| 19. | R: Right. And so there's an exchange. | |
| 20. | P: The European tradition has this kind of thing of you're hurting yourself in sacrificing. | |
| 21. | P: This is more that actually you're going to help yourself in this. This is a helpful act. | |
| 22. | R: Right. And I think when Europeans first saw our sun dances and they saw the men piercing, they thought that it was some kind of a self-punishment or some sadistic kind of thing that we did. | |
| 23. | R: But I think that says something more about the way they're thinking: They're thinking that they've brought—and to perceive that ceremony in such a negative way. | The way that Europeans think about sacrifice is different from how Rena's culture understands it. |
| 24. | R: We don't believe that we were born evil or with sin or that there's any— | Sacrifice does not involve a belief that humans are inherently evil or bad. |
| 25. | P: Right, you're not purging *that*. | |
| 26. | R: No. We don't *have* to get rid of bad things. | Sacrifice does not involve a process of purging or getting rid of bad things. |
| 27. | R: So we don't believe that. We believe that people come from the Creator. | The Creator is the source of our life. |
| 28. | R: They come from the spirit world and that we're good and— | People come from the spirit world. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 29. | P: Well, why does this work have to happen on a mountain or on the land? Why not in the gym? I didn't say that yesterday, but that's what I was thinking. And then you said something about, "Well, you need to be on the land. That's where it happens," and that you needed that participation of the other nations, of life—those are my words—the tree and that. Can you say just—one word that came out to me is, Do they bear witness to the healing? Or is it—? Yes. | |
| 30. | R: Well, that's a perfect way to describe it, I think, and thank you for giving me those words because I'll keep them and I'll use them. | Rena appreciated and agreed with my use of the word *witness*. |
| 31. | R: I think that is what it is. The first year that we went, we drove for two days or whatever it was, two-and-a-half days, to get there; and while we were traveling there, we counted the wildlife that we found along the way, and just the abundance of it was unbelievable. So we had twenty black bears that we saw on our travels, and then there was rabbits and there were, of course, bison and cranes and swans and eagles and all kinds of things. And I've been on that trip other times, and there wasn't so much wildlife that were coming to meet us. And so what we would believe is that the animals are connected in a better way than we are. They know that we're coming; they know that there's fasters coming in that vehicle, and they come and they present themselves to us because they want to honor us because they're glad that we're fasting | The journey to the fasting site was like a procession being watched by other life forms.<br>The abundance of animals present suggests support for and agreement with what the humans are embarking upon.<br>This agreement and support comes in the form of honoring |
| 32. | R: So they, yes, bear witness and appreciate it, so they know the prayers will be for them. | Animals appreciate the efforts of humans because the animals know that the humans will benefit as a result of the fasting endeavor. |
| 33. | R: And I guess they understand that connection that we have to each other. What *I* was taught was that the bears are brothers and sisters to us. | Animals understand the connection between humans and themselves. Humans can do the same by acknowledging their kinship with other animals. |
| 34. | R: That's how we need to think of them and respect them and treat them that way. | The idea of kinship or animals as brothers and sisters provides the basis for respective behavior towards them. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 35. | R: And that they believe the same thing that is true about us. | This understanding is reciprocal. |
| 36. | R: And so when they see that we're doing something good that's going to help all the nations on Mother Earth and her, they're glad. | |
| 37. | P: Mm-hmm. I'm thinking of a procession to the mountain and then the animals coming and recognizing and honoring and paying homage to acknowledging of your work. So you would say then that animals *know* what you're doing. are conscious of what you're doing? | |
| 38. | P: Maybe not in the way we're conscious, but are *conscious* of—so they're looking. You're being watched. | Animals are conscious of what humans are doing by looking and watching. This may be different from the traditional form of our understanding of consciousness. |
| 39. | R: Oh, yes; oh, yes. It's not an accident that they come upon us. | That the animals witness this activity is not an accident. |
| 40. | R: Are you kidding? That's their home; they know every little— | Animals in their home know what is happening in it. |
| 41. | R: —leaf and rock. They don't come on us by accident, so they know we're there, and they present themselves to us sometimes. Sometimes they might be sent by—remember what I talked about, that there is the physical world and then there's the invisible world, the spirit world? | Animals present themselves to us. They are sent by those in the spirit world. |
| 42. | R: And that everything that's here in the physical world also is connected to the same in a spirit form. | This is not because of an accident, but by design of the relationship between the animal and spirit world. |
| 43. | R: So there's the eagle that lives here and then there's the eagle spirit in the spirit world. | For each animal on earth there is similar animal spirit. |
| 44. | R: Well, our grandmothers and grandfathers, our ancestors live in the spiritual world, and they might work with them, with the spirits of those animals and send them to give us a message. | Elders know that ancestors who live in the spirit world still have influence. The may influence the spirits in the animal world to instruct the animals in ~~the~~ physical world. |
| 45. | R: Or maybe we're connected to that animal in some way. | Our connection to animals can be seen in a different light. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 46. | R: So that little chickadee might actually come to bring me a message to help me with my healing— | Animals can bring messages that can help in our healing. |
| 47. | R: —or to give me an answer to something that I'm wondering about. | The message can come in a form of an answer to a question that a person has been seeking. |
| 48. | P: Right. So there's a collaboration going on in the spiritual world to help— | |
| 49. | R: Yes. | |
| 50. | P: —to help. So— | |
| 51. | R: Or that they might need help. They could tell us that too. | This relationship or collaboration does not go only one way. |
| 52. | R: Maybe there's something we can do for them. | Humans can influence animals, which in turn can influence the spirit world. |
| 53. | P: Okay, right. So then that process isn't—again, this is stuck on that about you: It might be about you receiving help; it might also be you giving help. | |
| 54. | R: Yes, mm-hmm. | |
| 55. | P: I almost forgot about the idea of the sacrifice. So we also earn gifts by putting ourselves through this ceremony. | |
| 56. | R: And that's important to understand as well. And so by being willing to commit to do my first fast, then I was told I needed to do seven fasts. And by making that decision to commit to do those seven fasts— | An ongoing commitment is required for the benefits of fasting to occur. |
| 57. | R: —I also knew that that meant that I would earn whatever it is, whatever gifts are waiting for me. So the kind of work that *I* do, I work with people. I try to help them in some way all the time. Everything that I'm doing is all about that. And so if there's gifts that could help me to do that, then it would be great for me to earn them so that I could put them in my toolkit, so to speak, and take them with me. | What is learned during the fast is considered earned, and what is received is a gift. These gifts in Rena's case are gifts that can help her in her work with people. |
| 58. | R: And so that's already happened to me. | Rena has experienced this in her life. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 59. | R: So by going and participating in the ceremony, *I'm* the one who—I have received spiritual gifts that are useful to me in the work that I do. And as time goes on and you grow spiritually and these gifts come to you, then you also have an obligation and a responsibility to use them. | These "gifts" are considered spiritual gifts and bestow upon the receiver an obligation and a responsibility to use them. |
| 60. | R: The Creator is giving them to you because he knows that ten years down the road this person is going to come to you or this *animal's* going to come to you, and they're going to need you to do something for them, and that's why you're— | These gifts come with a particular purpose that will help us to address a particular problem that some person or animal will present to us. |
| 61. | P: Can you give an example, something that came to you as a gift that helps you as a helper or a healer? | |
| 62. | R: Well, so last year I was made a pipe carrier, which is an important responsibility in our culture, to carry a pipe and take on that role to pray, to pray for others, to be the carrier of the ceremony that raises our voices to talk to the Creator. So that has lots of potential to be helpful to others. | |
| 63. | P: Mm-hmm. Okay. That's a nice example. | |
| 64. | R: So I was just thinking, it's reciprocal, and the gifts are gifts that might be—well, they *are*; they're specific gifts meant for you— | |
| 65. | P: And your future— | |
| 66. | R: Oh, yes. | |
| 67. | P: —and what you might come across, and they will help you—and the potential of helping others. | |
| 68. | R: Right. | |
| 69. | P: You might be given the specific gift to help a specific person with a specific thing. | |
| 70. | R: Mm-hmm, yes. And for other people, they may become healers of some kind or different things like that. | |
| 71. | P: Mm-hmm. Okay, that's helpful. And so the last one in this little part is just around the notion of—and before the tape started I was talking about, you said that your spirituality and your relationship to the land are deeply connected. I was trying to think, Now, are they overlaid? This is my analytical mind. Are they interwoven? But then it seems to me that it just is; that's what it is. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 72. | R: I think they're the same thing. | There is no distinction between the notion of spirit and land. |
| 73. | P: They're the same thing, yes. | |
| 74. | R: Yes. So I don't think I know how to separate them. | In Rena's experience, she cannot separate them. |
| 75. | R: And so what I would say is that I don't have a *religion*; I have a way of *life*. | This nonduality is represented in the way that she lives her life. |
| 76. | R: And it's not just about certain kinds of ceremonies or rituals; it's about values and principles that are important to live by— | Certain values and principles by which to live emerge from this type of experience in the world. |
| 77. | R: —that we were given in our teachings, and my life is about trying to live those the best I can. | The teachings from her fasting and relationship to land offer values and beliefs by which she tries to live. |
| 78. | P: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Well, that was certainly my sense yesterday: again, that you don't take this experience and bring it and say, Okay, this is—it's more, as you say, a way of life; it's a view of the world. | Your experience in the world offers a way to live with others. |
| 79. | R: Mm-hmm. | |
| 80. | P: It's the way that you look at others in terms of how you perceive them. | |
| 81. | R: Yes. | |
| 82. | P: And again, this seems very inclusive, and it doesn't kind of separate things: Nature's here; humans are here. You know what I mean? | |
| 83. | R: Right. | |
| 84. | P: It's all, again, that circle. | |
| 85. | R: Yes, and that's probably no surprise if you think about it. | There should be no surprise in this way of understanding the world and its implications for how we live. |
| 86. | R: If you know anything about Aboriginal culture, that's what people always talk about, is that sense of being in harmony with other things. I guess that's probably the biggest value. | How we live in the world requires a sense of harmony. |
| 87. | P: But it also represents a way of living, as you say. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 88. | R: It has to be a way of life. | We cannot separate this sense or need for harmony from the way that we live our lives. |
| 89. | R: So it can't just be going to the ceremony on Sunday. | This does not occur in an isolated moment. |
| 90. | R: Right. It has to be a way of life. And it's not about how well you know the ceremony or those kinds of things; it's really, everybody watches how you live. | What we know about the ceremonies and so on is not as important as how we live, and how we live is always watched by others. |
| 91. | R: They watch how you interact. Those are the things that have an impact, I think, on others. | |
| 92. | R: Mm-hmm. But what I didn't mention but is the first thing that comes to mind and the most important, is really my relationship with the Creator. | All this originates and transpires within a relationship with the Creator. |
| 93. | R: The way we see it and what we believe is that, I've made a commitment to the Creator that I'm going to come here— | This involves a commitment to the Creator. |
| 94. | R: —and live in this physical world then for specific reasons. | The commitment involves living a purposeful live within the physical realm. |
| 95. | R: And I made that commitment to myself in that I'm fulfilling that. | This also involves a commitment to yourself to live this way. |
| 96. | R: And so that's really what is the most important that I do, is, I can continued to have that relationship with the Creator, and then everything has to flow from that. So that has to come even before my relationships with my family because— | Rena's relationship with the Creator takes precedence over her relationship with her family because "everything flows" from this relationship. |
| 97. | R: —it's really what keeps everything in balance for me. | Her relationship with the Creator is what offers Rena balance. |
| 98. | R: And the grandmothers and grandfathers are very important, very close to the Creator, because they're in the spirit world. | Elders are very close to the Creator because they are in the spirit world. |
| 99. | R: They have much, much more knowledge than we have— | The Elders hold a greater wisdom than she does. |
| 100. | R: —and abilities, and so they're very, very important to help guide me and keep me on the path. They know what I'm here for too. | This wisdom acts as a guide and encompasses a greater understanding of what her purpose in live is. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 101. | R: I may not be able to remember it right now. | This wisdom is difficult to grasp and difficult to retain. |
| 102. | R: But they know, and so it's important that I spend my life trying to listen to them and pay attention to what they're trying to show me. | Her life is committed to listening to that wisdom by paying attention to what they are trying to show her. |
| 103. | P: Your Elders in your life, yes. | |
| 104. | R: Well, yes, whether they're in the spirit world— | Elders in the physical world also have wisdom to offer her. |
| 105. | P: Spirit world, right. | |
| 106. | R: —or whether they're here, yes. | |

### *Conversation #2 With Rena: Implications for Practice*

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 1. | I started the second interview with Rena by asking her about the type of work she does.<br>P: I know you do counseling one-on-one work, but you do group work, you do grief work, you do workshops. Just maybe describe it a little bit. | |
| 2. | R: Well, so I see people for individual counseling, I do A and E assessments, and I do therapeutic counseling in a traditional social-work way, I guess— | Examples of Rena's traditional social work practice. |
| 3. | R: —with individuals. So that's one of the things that I do. | |
| 4. | R: But more and more my practice is based more in my role as—what I'm called is a *circle keeper*. | She is doing more and more work as a *circle keeper*. |
| 5. | R: And that means that I'm a helper to a medicine woman Elder and healer and that I have earned the right to go out on my own even if she isn't with me and do different kinds of interventions with people. | She has earned the right to do this type of work independently. |
| 6. | R: And some of those interventions are—probably the most important is what we call a *traditional talking circle*. | Her work as a circle keeper involves *talking circles*. |
| 7. | R: That's one of the things that I use. It's a tool or a method that I use to work with people. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 8. | R: Very powerful and effective. And that can be expanded into workshops that I've done, so grief or loss workshops. I did one last fall in one of our small communities and utilized the talking circle. Those are probably the two main ways that I work with people right now. | In Rena's work she uses talking circles to facilitate grief and loss work. She has found this approach very effective. |
| 9. | R: I always tell the ladies when I'm explaining our protocol and how the circle works, I always tell them that the reason why that's so powerful is because in our daily lives, sometimes it's the only place we can actually go where we can speak without being interrupted or having anyone disagree with us and be able to say everything we have to say. | The talking circle provides a place for women to talk and say anything that needs to be said without being interrupted. |
| 10. | P: Okay, that's very helpful. So I've got some questions. [laughs] I understand that the smudging is a cleansing and the praying is—you mentioned yesterday a prayer was an offering. No, you're praying for others. What's the role in praying? Those first three things are getting you ready for the talking circle. | |
| 11. | R: Yes, because, like I was explaining before, we're always aware that although we're sitting here in the physical world, there's also the invisible world that is right there beside us. | Two concurrent worlds exist: the physical world and the invisible world. Emotional work is done in this context. |
| 12. | R: So when we use a circle for healing, we invite the healers in the spirit world to come and participate in that healing circle. | The spirits in the invisible world have healing potential and are invited to participate in the healing circle. |
| 13. | R: We ask the Creator to also come and be there with us and to send the helpers that are needed and the relatives, the ancestors of the women that are sitting in that circle—or whoever it is sitting in that circle—to also come. | The Creator is asked to participate and to send the helpers that are needed. Each woman has an ancestor/relative spirit that is available for her. |
| 14. | R: And that's where the healing can happen; that's part of the healing process, is that they will make healing happen. | This initial invitation or summoning is seen as part of the healing process. Or perhaps the point where the women and the spirits meet is where the healing begins. |
| 15. | R: I will be their worker, and they will be directing. So I will lead it; I say the prayer out loud— | Rena invites the healing spirits through prayer, but the spirit ancestors direct the work. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 16. | R: —and pray for us, and I will invite them to come and participate in the ceremony. | |
| 17. | P: Okay, that makes sense. And the singing? | |
| 18. | R: The singing actually is the same. When we pick up that drum and we sing the way we do with our traditional songs, it's like ringing a bell. | Singing summons the healing spirits. |
| 19. | P: It's a summoning. | |
| 20. | R: Yes, that's exactly it, yes. | |
| 21. | R: Yes, it's a prayer. | |
| 22. | P: Mm-hmm. Okay. Say the circle's going around, and a woman, obviously in great pain, grieving the loss of a child or—what's your role, or what do you do as the facilitator of the group? Would you use your, quote, unquote, "clinical skills" in that? What would your role be and purpose? | |
| 23. | R: So before we start this circle, I always talk about that. | Before Rena starts a healing circle, she establishes her role. |
| 24. | R: I talk about, I guess, what's expected out of people. And so what I say—and now I can just tell you exactly what I tell them: that when we sit in the circle, women might have words that are angry, they might tell us funny stories, they might tell us things they're really excited and happy about, and they also might share some of their pain with us— | Rena invites the women to share their stories of laughter, anger, excitement, or pain. |
| 25. | R: —and their tears, and it's a good place to do that. | The talking circle is a good place to share their emotions. |
| 26. | R: And if that happens, then you might wonder what you can do to support her. | Rena makes suggestions on how the other women can help each other. |
| 27. | R: And so I give them some suggestions before we get started, and so I would say, "Well, if someone in this circle starts to cry and you want to be helpful and you want to support her, there's some things you could do. The first is, you could pass the Kleenex, because that always seems to be helpful." | Rena provides a simple suggestion to offer someone Kleenex if you think a person needs it. |
| 28. | R: And then everybody laughs. | |
| 29. | R: And then I say, "And something else that you could do is, you could pray." | Rena also suggests that another way that women can help/support is to pray. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 30. | R: "So allow her to cry and allow her to do what she needs to do, and just pray." | The focus is on allowing the women to do what they need to do.<br>The focus is more on what the women needs than what Rena does. |
| 31. | R: And so that's what will happen. | |
| 32. | R: And it happens lots of times, so that's what women come for. They come and they bring whatever it is they have and— | Showing emotion through crying happens often in the talking circle. |
| 33. | R: And when I'm in that role as circle keeper and I see someone and I get a sense that they're there, they've brought something, and they're not sure whether they want to share it or not— | As the circle keeper, Rena can sense when the women have brought something but are not sure what to do with it or what to say. |
| 34. | R: —I will just quietly, without making any notice of it, I will start to pray and ask that they help her to find that courage to let that go, whatever it is that she brought, and ask those spirits to do their work. And then when she starts to cry, then I'll pray; I'll just continue to pray. And I'll ask that they help her to let it go and that she's relieved of— | Rena prays that these women can find the courage to let whatever she has brought to the circle go and to ask the spirits to help. If the women begin to cry, Rena continues to pray to the spirits and asks them to help her. |
| 35. | R: —whatever it is that she's experiencing. Also what I will do sometimes is, I'll light that smudge again because we know that that smoke from the smudge helps to take things to the Creator, and that's what we want. So we would say, "Well, if you let go of pain that you're suffering here, the Creator can take it and put it away somewhere where it won't hurt anybody any more." | A smudge is lit to symbolize how the pain can be taken to the Creator, and the Creator can take the pain and put it somewhere where it will not hurt anybody. |
| 36. | R: And we would also tell her, "Those Kleenexes that you used, we have a special paper bag there that you can put them in, and don't throw them in the garbage, because those tears are *so* precious and special that we will take that and we'll put it in a sacred fire so it can be released where it needs to go." | Tears are put into a paper bag and then burned so that the tears and the related pain can be released to where they need to go. |
| 37. | R: That's how the healing happens. | This is the process of healing. |
| 38. | R: So when someone's upset that way, then you have all those women, all her sisters sitting in the circle there, caring about her; they're all praying for her. | The other women in the circle are supporting the particular individual through their prayers. |
| 39. | R: Then we just wait patiently— | The group would then wait. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 40. | R: —until she does what she needs to do. | |
| 41. | R: And then the Grandfather (rock) gets passed to the next person. | |
| 42. | R: And if we've had a hard circle where at the end of it I really feel that people are really still into their feelings and still very emotional, then I use the magic of the drum and the songs to change the energy— | If the circle has been difficult, Rena may drum and sing to help change the energy in the circle. |
| 43. | R: —which is so perfect. It's a wonderful tool that— | The drum and singing are very useful for this. |
| 44. | R: —that I've been given—my drum and my voice—to be able to switch that energy in the room to make sure that when everybody goes home, they're okay to leave. | Rena understands her drumming and singing as a gift. |
| 45. | P: Mm-hmm. As you're talking, you have, for lack of better words, more, as you'd call it, your toolkit; you have a lot more at your disposal. Maybe it's just different tools. You have a whole spirit that you can draw upon— | |
| 46. | R: Mm-hmm. | |
| 47. | P: —a spiritual part for strength and guidance and the notion of energy. So it's a wider, if you—and in my view, it's less intrusive. You're not using psychological—it's not protruding into the person's psychological. You may say "I" statements, do you know what I mean? | |
| 48. | R: Mm-hmm. | |
| 49. | P: You're allowing the person to kind of unfold as they would unfold— | |
| 50. | R: Mm-hmm. | |
| 51. | P: —as it were. That's why probably each person gets to talk, and they each have their time. | |
| 52. | P: Is that—? | |
| 53. | R: Yes, you've got the gist of it. I think that's true. | |
| 54. | P: Yes, yes. Do you work the same then individually, do you know? | |
| 55. | R: When people come to see me for counseling at [counseling center], they're looking for something different. | When people come to see Rena in the city for counseling, their expectations are different. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 56. | R: So probably no. Then I would come more from a traditional social work perspective. I would ask questions; I would try to draw out whatever it is they're talking about. I might challenge them—those kinds of things that— | In this context she uses more of her traditional social work skills. |
| 57. | R: Yes. So it depends, I guess, who's hiring me, what they're actually looking for— | Again the context and what potential clients are looking for determines her approach. |
| 58. | R: —and what my role would be. But if I'm in the role of a circle keeper, that means that I have a different responsibility than when I'm in the role of a clinical social worker. | The roles of circle keeper and clinical social worker have different responsibilities. |
| 59. | P: Right. Okay. So what's your sense of just suffering and healing, the pain people come to you—? How do you—? Is it a narrow kind of an emotional experience? For you it would be much more spiritual suffering, not only physical and emotional suffering. | |
| 60. | R: Oh, yes, yes. So I have a holistic view of it, so I would talk about healing on body, mind, emotion, spirit. | Not only is our suffering emotional, but it also involves our physical, intellectual, and spiritual. |
| 61. | R: And you can see that when you work with people. You can see which areas are the gaps, I guess, or what needs healing. | Rena can see where work needs to be done in terms of the person's physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual lives. |
| 62. | R: It's not just about their emotions. | She takes a wider view of a person's suffering. |
| 63. | R: Sometimes the way they are thinking is not in balance or isn't going to work; they need different information. | Sometimes a client needs particular information for his or her specific problem. |
| 64. | R: And we call them *teachings*. That's what the Elders give: They give you teachings— | This information takes the form of teachings, which are what Elders provide. |
| 65. | R: —that you can have that knowledge. And then, of course, because we're also spirits, we have to have healing on that level as well. | |
| 66. | P: Mm-hmm. And how do you facilitate that kind of discussion or—? | |
| 67. | R: Well, it's not about a discussion. | Encompassing the spiritual realm in the part of our healing does not involve a discussion. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 68. | R: So spiritual healing isn't something that *I* can do. | It is not something that the helper can "do." |
| 69. | R: I'm just the worker. But the grandmothers and grandfathers in the spirit world, some of them have that ability that they work on that level, so they can do the healing of that person's spirit. | The Elders in the spirit world do this type of work. |
| 70. | P: And is it a challenge for you to walk on kind of as a pipe carrier and a facilitator and your perspective, and then having this whole kind of social-work perspective? Are they contradictory? Or are they complementary? Or do you feel like you're walking a line? Or is there any—? What's that like? | |
| 71. | R: I'm not finding it a struggle. So I think most of my work, obviously, is more as a circle keeper. | Rena's work as a circle keeper does not conflict with her work as a counselor/social worker. |
| 72. | R: But when I see clients for counseling, I just be myself. So I try to just be more of myself. That's sort of my challenges: just go with whatever feels right for me. So— | The challenge in either setting is to be herself and go with whatever feels right. |
| 73. | R: —I more and more think that what people need is to be loved and cared about. | People need to feel loved and cared about. |
| 74. | R: So I guess as I'm evolving as someone trying to help others, I suspect more and more that it's really about loving each other, and somehow if you can offer that to people with all those social-work values— | Her work is consistent with social work values, and these values accompany an expression of love. |
| 75. | R: —nonjudgmental—really, those values in social work are teaching you, This is how you really love someone in a proper way. | Being nonjudgmental is part of loving someone the "proper way." |
| 76. | R: Respect them; don't judge them that all those— | And respectful. |
| 77. | R: So is it contradictory? No, somehow I think, as I get better at being a circle keeper, I get better at being a counselor as well. | Being a circle keeper helps her to be a better counselor. |
| 78. | R: And also working from those non tangible things like just intuitively and— | Along with having the values of nonjudgment and respect, it is also important to work intuitively. |
| 79. | R: —and letting myself be guided by— | Rena allows herself to be guided by— |
| 80. | R: —whatever helpers are with me that day— | —whatever Elders (in the spirit world) are with her that day. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 81. | P: Mm-hmm. Well, you said being more yourself. | |
| 82. | R: Mm-hmm. | |
| 83. | R: Well, yes, I don't know what I mean by that. I guess I know that I learned certain specific skills, and that's what you need when you're a new social worker and you're— | |
| 84. | R: —trying to figure out how to work with people in the right way. But now after having done this for many years, I don't want to use those things that I was taught. | Rena's formal education and what she learned become less important to her, and she places more emphasis on who she is and downplays the notion of skills. |
| 85. | R: I just want to use whatever I have, Rena specifically— | She sees herself as a resource to the client. |
| 86. | R: —and whatever special gifts that *I* bring. That person's in front of me, so there must be a reason for that. | She brings special gifts that may be useful to particular people, and this has a logic to it. |
| 87. | R: And so I try not to think about all those things that we were taught, and I just try to go with—I'm trying to live a way of life— | Her work is a way of life. Her work is a way of living her life. |
| 88. | R: —that's based on harmony— | Harmony is important to the way that she wants to live. |
| 89. | R: —and it's based on relationship. So it seems to me that the better I am at living that, the more I'll have to offer people in a clinical setting. | This harmony is based on the relationships in her life. The more harmonious her relationships are, the more she will be able to offer those people with whom she works. |
| 90. | R: Maybe that's a more articulate way to explain it— | |
| 91. | P: Yes. | |
| 92. | R: —all the time, and I like to think that I'm getting *better*. | Rena hopes that her evolution/growth is for the better. |
| 93. | R: And when you're our age, you start to figure out who you are a little bit. | This process of evolution encompasses getting to know who you are. |
| 94. | R: And so I think that I have some qualities that are helpful to people if I allow myself to just be who I really am— | As she understands herself better, she will be able to use her unique qualities to help others. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 95. | R: —without wondering if it's a good intervention and what— | It is more important to be yourself rather than worry about the type of interventions that you are using. |
| 96. | R: —all that critiquing that I have learned to do sort of. | The analytical skills are also less important than the process of becoming yourself. |
| 97. | P: And going up to the mountain and fasting and preparing and giving and receiving and the gifts that you receive from that whole process helps with that. | Her fasting activities on the mountain help her with this. |
| 98. | R: Yes, because it's helping me to become who I really am. | The fasting helps her to become who she really is. |
| 99. | R: It's kind of like—I've heard sculptors talk about, you'll look at something beautiful and you think, "Wow! You created this." And they'd say, "No, it was always there. I just took the extra away." | There is a part of her that is always there waiting; she finds it by taking the "extra" away. |
| 100. | R: And I think of that for myself too. | |
| 101. | R: I just have to get rid of the baggage that I've picked up along the way. | The "extra" is baggage that Rena has picked up along the way in her life. |
| 102. | R: I just have to get rid of the extra. | |
| 103. | R: And I think my relationship with the Elder that I'm helper to at this point has taught me something about love. So she is someone who exudes worth and love to everyone she meets. | When we get rid of this baggage, we are able to love more freely and express this love more directly. |
| 104. | R: And I've watched her work with people and got to work alongside her, and I recognize how *powerful* that is. Each person in the room feels like somehow they have a special relationship with her— | Each person who works with the Elder feels that he or she has a special relationship with her. |
| 105. | R: —and that they have something valuable. When they leave, they know that she recognized that preciousness in them, and they are so impacted. | They feel that the Elder has recognized their preciousness, and this has a deep impact upon them. |
| 106. | R: And at the end of whatever we're doing, a workshop or something, they want to hug her and they want to give her gifts and they thank her and they want to see her again, and all kinds of things. So she's had this impact on them. | Clients want to reciprocate this emotion. |
| 107. | R: Yes, I think it's those things. And that's because she was raised with those traditional values— | The Elder was raised with traditional values that help her to relate to others in this way. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 108. | R: —the values that were given to her people on how to live life. | These values help to set a direction for how to live life. |
| 109. | R: So they call them *Dene law*. | |
| 110. | R: And they're very specific kinds of things that you need to do so that you can get along with people basically. | These values are associated with a code of behavior. |
| 111. | R: And so she was raised with those values, and so that's how she interacts with others. It's almost like a recipe or a formula of how to have good relationships with individuals and as a whole community. | |
| 112. | P: Mm-hmm. And would you say that she learned that and her culture, learned that from their experience on the land? | |
| 113. | R: Right. So she was raised on the land and was taught by the Elders. They raised her, the Elders of that community. | These values come from her experiences on the land. |
| 114. | R: And so of course her experience of life is always connected to all aspects of creation. | The Elder's experience in life is always connected to all aspects of creation. |
| 115. | P: Right, because Nature and creation teaches us as well. | |
| 116. | P: You said it earlier: If we're willing to slow down and pay attention to it, one way is through sacrifice, realizing how special it is and how precious, but also how relational it is. | |
| 117. | R: Mm-hmm. Well, and that slowing down—I guess those messages from that world, those lessons, those teachings are available to anyone— | Listening attentively to the world around us can teach us valuable lessons. |
| 118. | R: —not just to me and not just to her; they're available to you as well—and everyone else | These lessons are available to everyone. |
| 119. | R: And the slowing down and listening, yes, we do that in ceremony, but we could do it right now. | Ceremony helps with this slowing down. |
| 120. | R: It's like what I was trying to describe yesterday, is about just paying attention and noticing— | These lessons are available when we pay attention and notice. |
| 121. | R: —the bird that flies by and the wind that touches your skin and those things. | |
| 122. | R: If you're waiting for and if you're paying attention to it, you'll see that those things that you thought were once subtle are actually not being subtle at all. | The subtleness of nature becomes less subtle when we pay attention to it. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 123. | R: And they are trying to get your attention and share something with you. | There is purposefulness to other life in the world; this comes in the form of an opportunity to learn. |
| 124. | P: We're almost out of time. Maybe in terms of relationship, maybe just say a little bit about your relationship with clients. Maybe just say a little bit about—but, on the other hand, you said that the more you become yourself, the more you think you have to offer. | |
| 125. | R: Right. Yes. So that's a great question, because I know that as I switch between that clinical social worker role when I do therapeutic counseling, I do try to maintain some of those boundaries, and that I have been taught about. But I find it much, much less when I'm in the role of circle keeper. So when I sit in circle, I talk about my own experience. That's part of the—I always think how disrespectful that would be if I sat in the circle and didn't honestly share what was going on in my life and from my heart. | The boundaries between Rena and her clients are less rigid in her work as a circle keeper than as a clinical social worker. |
| 126. | R: And in our circle, although I might be the circle keeper and I might lead things, we're all equal. | There is equality between Rena and the people who participate in her workshops. |
| 127. | R: And we're all there because we need healing, including me. | Everyone, including Rena, is considered as someone who needs healing. |
| 128. | R: And I know that, that that's true. And so we hug everybody. [laughs] We give people rides, we do all kinds of things that probably wouldn't be done in a— | These are examples of how the boundaries are less rigid. |
| 129. | R: —a different kind of setting. We see people in different settings, so there might be someone that comes to the circle who our kids know each other or play together. There's lots of boundaries that are already crossed. And maybe that happens in a small community like ours— | |
| 130. | R: —twenty thousand people. But also those boundaries are not part of our culture. We don't have the same beliefs around it. | There are cultural differences about how boundaries between helper and clients/participants are seen. |
| 131. | R: And so— | |
| 132. | P: So you're a participant too— | |
| 133. | R: I share about what's going on. I share about my fears and my worries and some personal things in the circle every time, and I do it on purpose for respect— | Rena shares her own vulnerabilities in the talking circle. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 134. | R: —because I don't want to put myself above anybody. | Sharing her own struggles is a sign of respect. |
| 135. | R: And I don't want to ever start thinking that way. | |
| 136. | P: Mm-hmm. How do you gain respect by doing that? I have kind of a sense why, but— | |
| 137. | R: Because we're learning from each other. | This respect occurs because it comes with the belief that Rena can learn from the participants as well. |
| 138. | R: And so when I can share about my struggles and then go on the next day and do the other things that I do, it's just being real. | In Rena's view, this involves a process of being real. |
| 139. | R: So that's really where the teaching is. I could do a little exercise in problem solving or whatever with that person and give them the tool, but if I just talk about what *I* did—and I don't even have to talk about them; I just talk about my own little story, and people will get it. | Rather than engage in direct problem solving, Rena tells a story about something she did in her own life. |
| 140. | R: They can get it anyways. | |
| 141. | R: They get the lesson in that. | The participants learn from these stories. |
| 142. | R: When we work, everybody works together. So after the circle is finished, the participants don't all leave and then the staff clean everything up and then we go home an hour later or something; we don't do it like that. | There is no separation in the responsibilities for cleaning up after the camps are over. |
| 143. | R: Everybody stays until we're done. | |
| 144. | R: They all do dishes; they all— | |
| 145. | R: And you know what? I've never, ever once asked anybody to. | This comes automatically from the participants. |
| 146. | R: They just do it because it belongs to them. | The sense of belonging to the community and the healing process initiate the desire to help out. |
| 147. | R: So why *wouldn't* they? | |
| 148. | R: It's not *my* circle; it's not *my* place. | The healing circle is not Rena's, but everyone's. |
| 149. | R: It belongs to all of us. And when we do healing camps, and even in our fasting ceremony, when we do stuff together, we all work together. | |
| 150. | P: Yes. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 151. | R: That's part of the joy of it, the learning, all those—there's other things that you can get out of it. | There is a joy in this experience. |
| 152. | R: But it's a philosophy that we're a community; this is why we're together: to support and help each other. | The participants and the workshop leaders are all part of the same community. |

***Rough ground.*** In many ways my interview with Rena was a journey into a different way of understanding nature. Through her personal experiences and learning from an Elder, Rena has a way of understanding the world that is much different from mine. In talking with Rena, I was continually challenged to think in a more relational way. Rena understands herself and everything she does in the context of relationship. Her personal healing took place within her relationship to the land and the animals that surrounded her, and she has always considered healing or personal change in the context of an exchange between herself and the land. The animals who observed her personal work not only took on the role of witness, but also had a particular moral agency that encompassed the ability to either approve or disapprove of her actions. Rena also described how special rituals helped to emphasize and support the highly relational nature of her healing process.

When I began talking with Rena, I soon realized that her sense of self and her personal identity are different from mine. I expected her to refer to herself as an independent and autonomous "I," but she very rarely did this. In both of our conversations she continually linked her sense of identity or any change process to a larger community. In fact, she described the idea of metaphorically sacrificing (giving up) her own life to the rest of the world as a key part of her healing journey. Rather than solidifying her identity, it was more important to let go of who she thought she was or wanted to be in order for a new sense of self-in-relation to emerge.

Rena made no distinction between spirit and the land, and within this context she has been able to experience the world in a way that has helped her to live her life. She argued convincingly that the only way that a person can learn to live in harmony with the rest of the world is to pay attention to what our experiences in the world teach us. She pointed out that it is difficult to listen to nature because of our hectic urban lives and that slowing down enough to truly listen to nature would provide us with lessons that can help us to live. She described these lessons as gifts designed especially for our individual needs and circumstances. In this regard, a bird, coyote, or any other animal might have a message that could help us to address specific problems or struggles that we face. Rena also considers animals as members of another nation who have a vested interest in how humans choose to live their lives.

Rena's own sense of morals or ethical behavior emerged from her experiences in nature. The lessons that she has learned from nature have helped to guide her behavior and challenged her to live in a way that is congruent with this experience. Rena experiences herself as a member of a community in which all members are considered to have equal value. As a result, she wants to live in a way that respects all forms of life on the planet and to extend love and compassion to these other "nations" as well. This is evident in Rena's work as a circle keeper. Rather than seeing herself as an expert or problem solver, she sees herself as a participant in the healing process of others. She is more interested in being *with* her clients than doing something *to* them. Her role is more of a support and a guide than an expert with a tool bag who can fix things. In an overall sense Rena's approach to her work as a circle keeper is highly inclusive, respectful, participatory, and continually linked to the surroundings in which any emotional work is done.

Perhaps my conversation with Rena could be described as an example of a cross-cultural dialogue. Her own ancestry and experiences with an Elder represent a tradition that is in many ways different from mine. While I engaged in conversation with Rena, I sometimes felt that I was entering "foreign" territory, and as a result I was challenged to listen more intently to what she was saying. In many ways I felt that it was more important to listen to her than to interrupt with my own beliefs and opinions. It is important to note, however, that although there are differences in the ways that we understand the world, a significant amount of mutual understanding also exists between us. I think it was evident throughout our conversation that we shared a deep commitment to understanding the role that nature plays in the healing process. We also agreed on many points, and I think we were both satisfied with the level of understanding that we had reached by the end of our conversation.

### *Conversation #1 With Paula: Ecological Identity*

Paula is a woman who lives in a large metropolitan area with her husband and two teenage stepsons. Throughout much of her life Paula was heavily involved in the Catholic church community. While being a member of this community, she became concerned with issues related to the administration and operation of the church. Paula tried to address these concerns by bringing them forward to the leadership of the church by using her skills as an organizational consultant. Eventually, however, she became frustrated and disillusioned with the church's inability to address her concerns and left the church community. In addition to her work as an organizational consultant, Paula has had a longstanding love for nature and described her experiences in nature as an important source of joy and meaning in her life.

I interviewed Paula in the dining room of her home. We sat on one end of the dining room table with the microphone between us. Her dining room provided a very comfortable setting for our conversation. As we talked, her family dog lay on the floor beside us. After some difficulty with the recording equipment, our conversation eventually began. Throughout our conversation Paula was very relaxed, but at the same time considered my questions carefully and tried to answer them the best way that she possibly could. In an overall sense I was struck by Paula's clarity and the poetic way in which she described her experiences.

| | **Excerpts from conversation** | **Reflective comments** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Paula and I briefly talk about hermeneutics and then discuss the best place to start our conversation. | |
| 2. | PV: Yes, maybe that's a good place to start, throughout your life, because some people talk about that. It's always been a touchstone, or "It played a role in my life." And a lot of people talk about it from their early childhood experiences initially and then going through their life. So whatever is comfortable for you. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 3. | P: Well, I guess if I was to synthesize it, I would say that nature is the place where, I guess, I best get the sense of myself in relationship to the universe that I inhabit, and it's always been a place for me of solace, if you want to—and also a place of stripping down in the sense of more direct contact with reality. And absolute joy. I just think of all conditions that I've experienced in my treks and travels and my childhood wanderings and getting lost in woods and that kind of stuff. [laughs] And I would always look back on those times with some kind of longing, that I'd want to return, and I'd want to return. So if I look at the big picture of my childhood, those moments stand out really strongly, and they stand out strongly probably for *different* reasons. One of them is, it was a getting away from a big, turbulent household. The other part of it though is that there was a, I don't know if I want to say a *communion*, but a way of dialoguing with—I used to go out early spring and wait for the violets to come, and I'd come home with a handful of violets after being away for three hours [laughs] just looking under leaves and that sort of thing. So it was a waiting for the seasons as well and the changes, yes. | Paula's experiences in nature offers her a sense of her "self" in relationship with the rest of the universe. Nature becomes a place of solace where things are stripped down and allows her a more direct contact with reality. This experience brings Paula joy and brings back memories of her childhood experiences in nature.<br>She described her present-day experiences in nature as a communion and continual dialogue with the world. |
| 4. | PV: Wow! You've really named a number of experiences that are very—what's the word?—really resonate for me: the stripping down, the relationship with the stripping down, the relationship with the broader world, and that longing that you have to get back to it. Can you say a bit about that stripping down? What's that about? | |
| 5. | P: I guess it even surprises me [laughs] that that phrase came. But there's something essential, I think, about—even look where we're sitting, how many things get in the way. But to be there with the sky and the tree and the breeze and the river or whatever it is, listening to the waves rolling in on the ocean, there's a contact with reality for me that helps to strip away all of the interferences in a way. It also helps strip away the ego and that whole cultural sense of, I'm this person from this culture, from this economic strata; then I should have expectations at different times of my life to be in a different place. And I *need* to have that stripped away so I can live in my own essence, I think. | Her experiences in nature allow her to strip away the expectations that the culture in which she lives places upon her. This stripping away allows for ego dissolution and creates the opportunity for Paula to "live in [her] own essence." |
| 6. | PV: Okay, so it's a clearing away, getting to kind of who you really are, it sounds like, or an *essence* that you talk about. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 7. | P: Yes, in relationship. I think it strips away the maybe false or ego expectations, and then it seems for me it helps me to be in communion or communication with something greater than that I'm really drawn to. | This essence in part is an experience of relationship or communion with something greater, and Paula is drawn to this. |
| 8. | PV: What *is* that greater? What? Do you put a name—? Just what is—I don't want to say *that*, but what's that experience, something greater? Do you put a name to it, or how do you relate to that? | |
| 9. | P: That's right. [laughs] | |
| 10. | PV: That's a nice, simple question. | |
| 11. | P: And no. No, I don't though, because I mean, for *years* I was a religious person, and I'm not any more, and I think religion actually got in the way. And although the part of me that was a religious person was a part of me that was seeking for some kind of connection—or a way to even interpret the beauty—and so I think then that experience, that seeking, is maybe a way of just being in the beauty without even having to try and figure it out, and the beauty sometimes is magnificent, and other times it's terrible. But it's a bigger-than experience. It's a way—how do I say that? | Paula indicated that her past religious involvement may have led her to "name" this experience, but she suggested that this might actually get in the way of simply experiencing nature. She described it as a "bigger-than experience" but admitted that she cannot describe it in words. |
| 12. | PV: So it's not something that you put language to; it's something that you experience. | |
| 13. | P: Absolutely! | She agreed with my comment that her experience in nature cannot be put into words. |
| 14. | PV: And through beauty or the range, but it's something that you experience that it doesn't have words for. | |
| 15. | P: No, no, no. [pause] No, and I never go with the intention of looking for words either. It's a way of being and in that place when I still myself, because at times it can take me a while to get the head slowed down from whatever I'm trying to work out. Then there's just a presence to that in a way for me that I could not achieve through meditation; I think that's my way of being connected to whatever that is—the universe or creation or that—in that environment. And there are always surprises as well. | Paula also indicated that she does not enter nature with the intention of trying to describe her experience. In anticipation of her experience, she tries to slow down and "stills' herself to experience a connection with "whatever that is." Within this experience there are lots of surprises as well. |
| 16. | PV: What do you mean by *surprises*? | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 17. | P: Well, there's patterns. I mean, the surprise is how it's always new, and yet there's a repetition. So I'm just like this crazy kid. Every year I go around, running down to the river, waiting for—I call them the *ice amoebas*; someone else calls them *little flowers*. But there's a certain period on the river before the ice solidifies that you get these round formations, and they bump into each other, and they make a particular noise that you never hear any other time of the year. So there's this, kind of the kid in me comes alive, waiting for—I know that I'll be able to hear that noise. And if it's warm like it was this year periodically, then I'll get to hear it [laughs] two or three times and watch these circles bump into each other, and there's just a sense of something that is, well, I want to say eternal, but that could be— | The surprises in nature for Paula come in both repetition and newness, which work in concert to bring forward an aspect of nature that rekindles her experiences as a child. Observing nature involves all of her senses. Her eyes see the new patterns in the ice, and she hears a familiar noise that happens at a similar time every year.<br>She also feels the warm weather as the ice bumps into itself. This experience brings a sense of 'eternity" or perhaps timelessness for Paula. |
| 18. | PV: Do you anticipate it, and does it provide reassurance: "Oh, there it is"? Or that pattern that—? | |
| 19. | P: No. | |
| 20. | PV: No? It's not that—? | |
| 21. | P: I think it's just joyful; it's just *fun* to see these round things. It's about crystals, right? And if you've ever seen them magnified as they are sometimes on a screen, they all have a particular shape and a structure. And so just to think that there's—maybe I use the word *eternal* just because it's like a permanent structure that's imbued in creation that I can't understand, and I can't see with my own eye, but there it is [laughs] at that time. | This experience brings a sense of fun and joy in that it represents a particular structure inherent in creation that cannot be seen with the naked eye, but at the same time is represented in the crystals of ice. |
| 22. | PV: Okay, I understand that, okay. You said earlier on, you used the word *solace*— | |
| 23. | P: Oh, yes. | |
| 24. | PV: —that there's a solace, and you also said you don't have that experience in meditation as much as you do in nature. Is that true? Is that what I—? | |
| 25. | P: Right. | |
| 26. | PV: Okay. So what does *solace* mean? | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 27. | P: Well, I think it feels like I can come home to myself, and the self belongs there. And I don't have to practice a technique or go through stages of evolution in order to reach a place or not. It's just, in that place the solace is that it's comfortable; it's comforting to be me because it's like I belong there. I'm this earth person, this body that lives here, and I'm fully at home in that place. So I think that's the solace, because I can often feel like an alien in that little world [laughs] or in the company of others or that, and so it helps to bring me back to that sense of connection, I think. | Paula's experience in nature provides her with solace. The experience of solace encompasses a coming "home" to her "self." She described this experience in bodily terms and suggested that the experience of her "self" in nature feels like belonging and being fully at home. She contrasted this feeling with her experiences in the company of other people. |
| 28. | PV: So it's a coming home in a way. | |
| 29. | P: Yes! That's a good way of putting it. | |
| 30. | PV: Coming home to yourself in the world. | |
| 31. | P: Yes, in relation. | |
| 32. | PV: In relation. | |
| 33. | P: Yes, in relation to the elements: the water, the earth, the plants, yes. | The experience of "coming home" is highly relational and encompasses a relationship with the elements of water, plants, and so on. |
| 34. | PV: And once again, it's not something that you think about; it's something that you experience. Is that right? | |
| 35. | P: Yes, and I think in a way I experience, but it does something to me too, because it frees me in a way. Saturday after the snow, we were down at the end of Kinnaird Ravine. Well, there was this untouched mound of snow, so I had to go and make a snow angel, and the kid's just there, waiting to make a snow angel. Even though I'm in my sixties, it doesn't matter; I'm flopped down on the snow doing it. [laughs] ________ snow wants to have someone play in it. And so it evokes my playful spirit, and yes, and so we interact; I play with the snow. And, of course, the dog helps teach me that too, because that's abundant joy and energy, kind of that, yes. | Her experience in the snow frees her in a way that allows her to respond to the snow in a particular way. She understands the snow as wanting to be played with, and this activates her own inner child. |
| 36. | PV: So does it call you? You say that it's there; does it call you, the snow? Or what's—? | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 37. | P: And it doesn't have to be the snow; it could be the stars under the night sky. Well, I think it frees me from convention, and maybe the call is just that being able to take a breath and have, I think, a kind of awareness. To me, see, that's the essential part, is, to me that's normal. To me it's normal to be in love with beauty; it's normal to be able to have the layers stripped away and the chatter go away from my brain so that I can stand by this tree and feel its energy, or sit by the water, or be in the mountains day after day after day, and just kind of unpack. There's this thing—yes. | The calling of the snow is translated as an opportunity to take a breath and return to a particular type of awareness that seems normal to Paula. It involves an unpacking or a stripping away of the chatter in her brain. |
| 38. | PV: Well, that's interesting that you find *that* normal compared to how we all live our lives. It suggests that there's something askew in a way; that's just the theoretical part. So does it free you from convention, from kind of the world in terms of what's expected of you and what you *should* be rather than who you *are*? | |
| 39. | P: Well, it's the light part of me is the joyful part of me; it's the part of me that's always been there but has been enculturated to really be moderated, and especially in my childhood, but escaping to the woods or something would help me to kind of acknowledge that part of me and get to know that part of me. But there's that kind of internalized thing in me that in a conventional sense it would be toned down a lot. And if I'm out in—a beautiful memory I have is hiking up Paradise Valley in August, and the flowers are just so plentiful, so many different colors. There's such extravagance that it just invites me to, again, strip away the self-imposed limitations and be as fully radiant—I mean, without being self-conscious of it or even aware of it, but it's more of a feeling that comes all of a sudden: "Oh, wow! I could live from the inside out like these flowers are doing here today." [laughs] Doesn't mean that I won't have my seasons when I'm dormant or grieving or something else, but there's that— | Escaping to the woods allows Paula to revisit a part of her self that has been "encultured" or perhaps covered over by the experiences of her everyday life. This part of her is toned down, but when she is in nature, her self-imposed limitations disappear, and she comes to understand that she can live her life from the inside out, similarly to the flowers that she observes. |
| 40. | PV: Living inside out—I'm not sure what that means. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 41. | P: Well, I think it means a little bit about when I talk about essence more, or clearing away some of those self-imposed limitations, the self-consciousness, the convention, the social expectations—and not only that other people, but that I've internalized in my lifetime and put on myself as well. So for me that's living from the inside out, the inside part of me, that life that wants to express itself, the creativity that just wants to, yes, not do anything with it necessarily; just be, and be expressive of that. And maybe through that relationship of, well, being in love with the beauty for that time. | Living from the inside out means letting go of the externally and internally imposed limitations placed upon her and living from the part of her that she described as the life that wants to express itself. This life energy needs nothing but to be acknowledged and appreciated. |
| 42. | PV: —that experience? There's some similarity there. | |
| 43. | P: Well, for me, the other nature pattern are the seasons and the changing sky and the waxing and waning of the moon, and that allows me as well to know that while I might remember with a lot of joy all the bliss and that, there are other times where I might be going down to the river and sitting on a rock somewhere and just trying to figure out what the pain's about and what the turbulence is about too. So again there's a connection though, because it's as if there's no censorship. I don't have to censor myself, nor if it's the river I'm watching or a flock of birds coming and going, I'm not being censored either. So I can engage then in my own drama by reflecting on the creative drama around me. | Engaging in nature can be a full, uncensored encounter with her self, which can be represented and acknowledged in the drama of life that takes place around her. |
| 44. | PV: Well, that's nicely put. | |
| 45. | P: Well, I think it might give me permission to have the feelings I have. When you ask the questions, I'm really amazed at how much you're drawing out [laughs], and I'm quite delighted by it. I think I've always processed my transitions and my losses as well as my gains by either going out to Elk Island Park if I can't get farther, or some park in the city or off to the wilderness, somewhere or other. And yes, someone else used the term *touchstone*; well, it's like a place where I can integrate those and just realize that it's what it is right now, and then there's a resonance for me. I don't know. [laughs] | Her forays into nature act as a touchstone for Paula. Nature provides a place where she can take stock of her life in the context of a resonance with her natural surroundings. |
| 46. | PV: So you bring kind of a sensitivity in your life where you're able to acknowledge—that's not quite the word—what's happening around you, and you're in your world now around where nature is, the spots of nature, so to speak. | |
| 47. | P: Right, right, right. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 48. | PV: Do you bring anything else from your experience down in the ravine? It sounds like you bring joy; do you see things differently in your life after—? | |
| 49. | P: Well, see, I don't know if I separate. I think what quickens in me in a way there happens the same way if I'm in group and there's something particular that's growing or being lived in a group situation, that I can also use that same sensitivity for that. I bring a different essence then though because I'm in a role, whereas if I'm walking down by the river, I have no role at all except to participate, right? | The dynamics of nature that she observes can also be seen in the way that a group of people interact, but she is different in this context because she assumes a more defined role. Her role in nature is simply to participate. |
| 50. | PV: Right, right. Hmm. That's a good differentiation. | |
| 51. | This is the last kind of theme around this: When you're in the experience of nature, you talked about communion. Is there anything that when you say, "This means this about me," or "This experience places me in my home," you mentioned—do you think about who you are? Does it give you a boundary or a role, or is it more an experience of space or place? Do you know what I'm trying to get at? | |
| 52. | P: No, I'm not sure if I understand. I'm not sure if I understand the question because I don't know if I think that way in terms of, it would be like a self-awareness or a definition, I think. [laughs] | |
| 53. | PV: Well, maybe a better question: You say "I find myself in relation." | |
| 54. | P: Yes, yes. | |
| 55. | PV: That's more the root. You don't pinpoint; it's self in relation, so a wider sense of self kind of happens in experience, but not that you could put boundaries on yourself? | |

| | **Excerpts from conversation** | **Reflective comments** |
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| 56. | P: No, and I've always had this kind of psyche or way of being in the world that I don't know myself a lot of times; I don't know—it's like my process, my journey is often a dark journey. And so it's hard in this kind of world where you set goals for yourself and you know where you're going; you're the author of your own life, as it were, when you're living and you're being and *wanting* to be the author of your own life, but you can't see the path. [laughs] And I think that for me that experience in nature helps me to accept that. That's an okay way of being in the world too. | Paula initially finds it difficult to answer my question. Her experience of her self is not as defined and distinct as my question implies. Paula's experience of her self in nature is more about being in relation, and as a result boundaries are more diffuse and less clear. This experience helps her to accept some of the challenges that she faces in her own life related to her life "direction." |
| 57. | PV: Oh, absolutely. | |
| 58. | P: Yes, I don't always know where I'm going [laughs]; I'm a lot of times struggling along. And yet when I know, when I've let time tell me, then it's right. And I think then as well it's like watching the seasons change and that I can be patient with my own seasons or my own direction, even when I don't know. | While Paula's life journey is a struggle, she clearly knows when something is right for her. Her experience of watching the seasons change allows her to understand and empathize with the changes and "seasons" in her own life. |
| 59. | PV: Thank you. That's—so I'm interested in that. I'm really interested in—again, I don't know if I can put it into the—but that notion of, you don't necessarily have that solid self, that experience. And I agree with you: That's an okay way of being. Say a little bit about that. You said that it was dark. Is it dark like—? Just tell me what that is like. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 60. | P: Well, it's dark in that—well, say career wise, for instance, I've got a certain kind of training that could put me into a certain way of earning a living, and I just have never followed a real mainstream. Mostly I've gone into places [laughs] and had doors close on me because the things that I see—I mean, I think that there's a cost, I suppose, to having that seeing and knowing and interaction with, because my presence can be disturbing in organizations. It can also be healing, depending on where that group is and what their intent is at the time. And so then, again, I take myself to nature. I go away, away from all the things that remind me that I have bills to pay and who I've created myself to be in those assumptions, and then I just let myself *be* again until the next path comes along and it's clear for me, and then I start going there. | The stressors associated with her work can be challenging to Paula's sense of self. Her sensitivity to how people interact and communicate can be a challenge to the people with whom she works. To help her contend with these challenges, Paula returns to nature, which allows her self to "be again" and acts as a personally restorative experience. |
| 61. | PV: I'm just going to summarize a little bit just so I can keep track, because that notion of, when I asked you about the self, that doesn't relate to you; it's hard to relate to that for you; and it's more around the notion of your own life experiences around not really having that boundary of a self, and so your path isn't clear sometimes. | |
| 62. | P: Mm-hmm. | |
| 63. | PV: Well, okay. So is there anything else just kind of for this section here, anything else? because sometimes I can get in the way of—is there anything else that you would like to say about your experience in nature and the topic about just your own life that—? | |
| 64. | P: Well, it's funny, you know, because I think there's a gender thing that happens too, because when you're talking about the sense of self, I probably have this big question mark in my eyes: What the hell is he talking about here? [laughs] It made me think of reading a book once called *Women's Ways of Knowing*, and it's about epistemology and how women figure out the world and whatnot. And when I read that book, I thought, Oh, well, now, now it makes sense to me. [laughs] And so I think I feel the same way a lot about goal orientation and productivity and whatnot. So once I get to the place of having gone through the transition and knowing, then it's as if, well, okay, now it's spring and I'm going on to new directions, and then I can be very clear about setting goals and working with them and prospering. | Paula pointed out the difference in the way that she and I understand the concept of self. She referred to a book that emphasizes women's way of understanding through experience and relationship. This has helped her to understand her own way of understanding the world, which has "bumped up" against mine. She described how this relational understanding of herself can be an important source of guidance in her life. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 65. | PV: Well, it's funny. You brought up the issue of gender, and I thought when I asked that question, Oh, that's a real male question. | |
| 66. | P: [laughs] | |
| 67. | PV: Do you know what I mean? | |
| 68. | P: Yes. | |
| 69. | PV: I thought, I'm trying to develop this isolated, alone, detached self with an ego, as we talked about earlier; and I thought, Yes, that's—so anyway, I was kind of trapped in my own kind of way of thinking, right? | |
| 70. | P: When you asked the question, I was thinking, Gordon could answer that one. [laughs] | Paula suggested that perhaps her husband could answer the question that I posed. |
| 71. | PV: Right, yes, yes. | |
| 72. | P: But I can't. [laughs] Yes, that's interesting. | |
| 73. | PV: No, fair enough. Thank you. | |

### *Conversation #2 With Paula: Implications for Practice*

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 1. | PV: Do you do private work mostly, or group work? Maybe say just a little bit about your work. | |
| 2. | P: When I took the program at the Leadership Institute of Seattle, I had a choice where I could study to become a family systems therapist or an organizational development consultant. But the group just [laughs]—it just fascinates me. It's about the dynamics and the interplay between people and how—well, as a teacher, you might relate to that too—every group takes on its own identity, and it's almost like a moment within a group; they have a choice point to either fragment or to come together and build something better. And sort of again I've enjoyed doing that as a consultant, is trying to work with people to say, "What season is it in your organization? Is this the season for growth right now, or is it a season for deterioration and—?" | Organizational work and group work has always interested Paula. She is intrigued with the process of helping organizations to become more effective and compared the dynamics of growth in an organization to the four seasons. |
| 3. | PV: Dormancy. | |
| 4. | P: Or dormancy, that's right, that's right, yes. So that intrigues me. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 5. | PV: So each group is unique and has a life of its own kind of. | |
| 6. | P: Yes. | |
| 7. | PV: So I'm just going to ask an open-ended question: You mentioned earlier on around that's a way of kind of seeing things and being in the world, that is supported in nature, and how does that come to life in your work with people in organizations? | |
| 8. | P: Well, I think it's the curiosity about the life within, the connection that the organization has to its stated mission and ideals. [pause] How else does it come? [laughs] I'm not going to try and force it. As much as I have a curiosity about watching the interrelationship between the plants and the seasons and the elements when I'm down by the river or up in the mountains or something, when I'm working with a group, trying to chart a course for them and help them realize what their own barriers are and their own wants are as a group, I get to observe those interplays that are going on internally and then offer that back to them as information for how they can pursue their goals or what they need to change to be able to get to where they're going. So that curiosity, I think, and that role of being able to—<br>But then it's not a being as much. I mean, the being part is in the observing and looking for, I use the word *portals*, and I'll use the word, some of the *surprises*, some of the dynamics that would be unavailable to them collectively because they're too close to it. But then I can step away and use that information and offer it back as a form of analysis or a mirror to the group, and that will either be welcome or very unwelcome [laughs], at which point that's their choice point as well. I don't personalize that though.<br>I think one of the challenges though is a comment that I've made, because I just went through a really painful transition last year, so a comment I made is that I bring my heart to my work, and it's been broken a lot of times. | Paula brings a curiosity to her work with organizations by watching their internal dynamics, similarly to the way that she watches the relationships between plants, seasons, rivers, mountains, and other elements of nature. In observing organizations, she is always looking for opportunities to reflect back certain dynamics that are inherent in the organizations that might not be apparent to them. Paula brings her heart to this work, and it has been broken a number of times. |
| 9. | PV: So, if you don't mind me asking this, what does "bringing your heart to work" mean? | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 10. | P: Well, it means that when somebody hires me, they get the whole package; they don't get me stepping out of myself now and saying, "I'm a performer" or "I'm going to—" I remember one group; I was doing work for school boards, and they said, "It was really hard to take you seriously because we're used to people wearing Gucci watches and expensive shoes, and you were just an ordinary person, and a woman as well, in a field that very successful people have been men who've taken it—" Anyway, I don't need to compare to a different style of leadership. | Paula tries to be an authentic individual in her work, and at times the people with whom she works challenge her because she is not who they expect her to be. |
| 11. | PV: So taking your heart to work means you bring your full self and who you are without any of the prejudice and preconceptions of what you *should* be or what the world thinks you should be to get power, so to speak? | |
| 12. | P: Yes. | |
| 13. | PV: Better to bring the heart than not bring the heart at all. | |
| 14. | V: Well, in a way, because I think I'd get really bored, or else I'd have to come home and figure that out as living a façade or a charade. And I've seen that happen in organizations, and I feel really uncomfortable. I saw one organization that actually hired me and a group of other consultants to do some work with—I won't name the public entity provincially—and I saw the leadership wanting to create a dependency so that they would always need the consultants going in. So my approach differed with theirs because I would go in and build up the strength within the organization so I could leave, and they wouldn't need me any more, and it was a value thing. So yes, I kind of got [laughs] marginalized because of that, but I feel pretty good about that, actually, because, to me, the other is not a healthy way; it's sort of self-contradictory. It was about organizational health, and if you've got the skill and the insight to keep an organization sick just so you can continue to be needed [laughs], I have a real issue with that as well. | In her work Paula tries to be an authentic individual because it would be contradictory for her to behave in any other way. She feels that her role is to help organizations to build upon their strengths so that, in the end, they are not dependent upon her for help. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 15. | The connection again back to nature for me is the interaction with what's authentic around there. And I guess I have this deep sense of curiosity. I have an opportunity to do some work in an organization that's really struggling—*highly* visionary, an organization after my own heart, but they're really have a hard time right now. And so as I start, I've got the same fear and interest, and a profound sense of, I guess, well, it feels like an honor to be brought into someone else's world, because as a group then, I'll be privileged to some of their insights and some of their things that they might prefer to keep to themselves, but they're hurting too much right now to do that. | Paula linked the authentic interaction between people in an organization to nature and feels honored and privileged to be privy to this interaction. She acknowledged that within these interactions is vulnerability and pain. |
| 16. | PV: So this bringing the heart to the organization, looking for authenticity in an organization, I'm really hearing that strongly. You used the word the *life* of an organization. How do you work with that in an organization—the life? And you used the word *unhealth*, but— | |
| 17. | P: Well, it's probably the part of my own studies, but I do know that groups and organizations, when they're first forming, well, it's like spring: It's exciting, there's new blossoms, there's new shoots, so it's all pure potential, right? And then there's always a time after—it can be a number of years—but after they get through that idealized phase that there are going to be forces within that organization that want to pin them down, bureaucratize a little bit, put policies and procedures in place and that. And while that can be important, it can also be a time when the visionaries really struggle in the organization. It can also be a time when the organization's at risk of losing its original vision and existing for the sake of growing more or its own existence. And so the health/unhealth part then comes from the organization itself being able to say, "Are we actually doing what we say we're meant to be doing?" | Often in the initial stages of their development, organizations have an idealized, visionary period that can be likened to the spring season with growth and new life. Paula suggested, however, that as time moves on, organizations can have a dampening effect on this process and lose touch with their original mission. Organizations sometimes do this because they become more interested in maintaining their own existence than in meeting the purpose for which they were originally developed. |

| | **Excerpts from conversation** | **Reflective comments** |
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| 18. | But the part about bringing my heart—and that's been a hard lesson for me, and I think I'll always continue to struggle with it—is that I haven't always been wise in being able to sort out the rhetoric or the idealized speak, this kind of hope-speak, from what the internal reality is; and that's where I get caught, because my own search for ideal can blind me [laughs] to what the reality is, okay? And yes, so as I've gone along and had different experiences, then I'd become more realistic in knowing that there— | In her work with organizations Paula is challenged to discern the hopes and idealized rhetoric of those in an organization with what is, in reality, going on. |
| 19. | PV: What's said and done are different things. | |
| 20. | P: That's right. Or where to look for the politics or when to be aware if there's another agenda going on than the one that's being spoken, and then to be a little bit wiser in getting out of the way. But I have a trusting nature, and so my tendency is really to want to work with what's the best in people and what the stated best in people is. | Paula suggested that reality often involves politics and other hidden agendas in an organization. Her preference is to avoid these problems and focus more on people's strengths. |
| 21. | PV: Well, in an organization in terms of an unhealthy organization, there's some things—they're sometimes leaders, or sometimes in the stage of the organization—that prevents kind of the health to flourish or move forward ________, and that sometimes is because people don't want to change— | |
| 22. | PV: —or because they're happy with what they have or the power they have, or they're afraid. Or sometimes I think people don't realize that what they're saying and what they're doing are—I would call that all kind of forms of, for lack of better words, a resistance. How do you work with that? It's difficult, especially when you're coming with a heart [laughs], so to speak. | |
| 23. | P: Well, my sense is to uncover what's holding that back, because I think all of us have had the experience of being in organizations at a period where you catch a wave, and it's thriving. | Dealing with resistance involves uncovering what is holding the organization back from reaching its potential. |
| 24. | P: And then we want to seek that because it draws on all of our creativity. That's the place we want to work. So I've gone into places where there's ghosts from the past in the fact that there's wounds within the organization that have never been healed that's holding them back. And once people can acknowledge that and lay it to rest, then they can move on. | Uncovering the reasons for resistance reveals old "ghosts" from the past that are represented in wounds that have never been healed. Acknowledging these wounds is the first step in healing that allows the organization to move on. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 25. | One of the groups I worked with had had a series of really divisive strikes, and it affected the whole community, and those were the ghosts. And once we could actually talk about that and I could mirror back to them the negative impact that that was having on their whole system in that part of the province—and they had a leader who could hear it and wasn't protecting an ego as well. They radically transformed, and that was an amazing experience for me. | Acknowledging these old wounds and how the role that they play in hindering organizations from achieving their objectives is an important part of this first step. Internal leadership is needed to help this process happen. |
| 26. | So the resistance—and I know in my studies and in the research I did, the neatest thing I learned was that at the root of resistance is usually some fear or some needs that haven't been met by people. They're afraid of losing something, or they need control, or whatever. So if it's possible to get at what those needs are, that can help dissipate the resistance, for sure. | The root cause of resistance in an organization is often fear that stems from needs that are not met and the feeling of losing control. Uncovering the specific needs that are not being met is a good place to start to address resistance. |
| 27. | PV: Oh, I see, okay. | |
| 28. | PV: Well, so this is a question just as really a leading question: So lack of better words, what's the nature in all this? | |
| 29. | P: Well, that's what I'm trying to think of too, is, what's the nature in the role of the leader or in organizational health, and what's the nature in—? | |
| 30. | PV: You certainly have talked about—I think bringing your heart is a form of nature, that original kind of self that you were talking about. | |
| 31. | V: Yes. And I think the other thing too is bringing the honesty to be able to say "It's not going to work now" and to allow or to work with the people internally to have them be really clear about what's manipulation and what isn't, and then to get the hell out when the place is a dangerous place to be. It's like I see the hurricane coming, and I'm going for cover. And I think that's a reality too in an organization where people are going to be harmed or they're going to be set up for failure or whatever. | Paula described the unhealthy dynamics of an organization that make it a difficult place to work as a hurricane. |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
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| 32. | So I guess when I talk to people now about life in their organizations, I ask them what season they're in. [laughs] I come right out; I say, "Are you in a growth season? Or is it time to be able to be wanting to do this? Do you have the right leadership? Do you have a way to support that?" because I think, again, the nature part or the leader part is someone who can go the distance and take the risk and that, because then— | Paula compared the growth phase of an organization with the dynamics of spring and emphasized the important role that leaders play in allowing this phase to exist. |
| 33. | PV: And go through all seasons, so to speak. | |
| 34. | P: Yes, just about, because it takes a leader to continue to communicate the importance of that, but also to give heart and courage to people who are going to have to give something up. Things are going to change, and we all like things to stay the same, so it's that change part. Maybe my love of nature and my ability—kicking and screaming a lot of times—to go through my own changes that have been forced on me [laughs] have helped me as well to bring a stance that says, Yes, it's going to hurt sometimes. [laughs] It's not going to look the way—or as somebody said, "It's going to get worse before it gets different" [laughs], and that can be the truth too, yes, when you start uncovering stuff. | Leadership and facilitating change involve supporting people and acknowledging the inherent struggles in the change process. Paula suggested that developing the skills to cope with change can originate within our experiences in nature. |
| 35. | PV: Is that a prerequisite for change, do you think—worse before different? | |
| 36. | P: Well, it just depends on where the starting point is. If you've got a healthy organization that's aspiring for something even more creative or advanced, it's just going to feel really enlivened for the people there. If you've got a really unhealthy organization that's afraid of a lawsuit or that's got a crisis going on and has a lot of things buried under levels of lies or manipulations or façades or that, it's going to get way worse, because people are going to see the crap that's been going on for what it is, and they're going to have to take stock of that too. | A healthy organization can facilitate a change process that is productive and meaningful, whereas an unhealthy organization facilitates change in a way that is harmful to the people who work in it and, correspondingly, to the organization as a whole. |
| 37. | PV: Your experience in nature was a sense of belonging. Is that in an organization too important? If people feel they don't belong, it's harder to contribute and be part of the life of the organization if you feel outside of it. | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 38. | P:—I see a lot of places where people are like cogs: They're there to just get the job done, get their pay cheque, and they don't want to have those kind of disturbing things. So I guess a part of *my* assumption is about, I want to work in organizations who do have some passion and who want to contribute, make a contribution. And so probably a part of my growth too in this is to say that I don't really want to invest somewhere where it's more lip service, or we've got to go in and pretend and do a façade. | The sense of belonging to an organization comes from working with people who bring passion to their work through a desire to actually contribute (make a difference) rather than pretend to be doing something. |
| 39. | So that sense of belonging then [sighs], it's an interesting question for me, because I'm not sure if that's something that someone else can provide, or if that's what each person's responsibility is to make a place for themselves or to choose a place where they can belong, and the belonging isn't there. | The sense does not come from an organization but from the people who work in it. Each person has a responsibility to make a place for him- or herself that fosters belonging. |
| 40. | PV: Well, that finishes your point. So it's not always the organization that has to kind of—it has to come from the individual as well around their own belonging. | |
| 41. | P: Well, people can go in with, and especially in the human services, often go in with a lot of idealism in wanting to make a difference, and it's the people who have been in for a longer term, and they're kind of burnt out or—I've used the word *compassion fatigue*—now that really want to dampen their idealism and just slow them down. So in a sense then, someone who does want to belong and make a difference can be held back from a group of people that are just tired [laughs], so we don't want that energy! That start-up energy is going to make us question our own lethargy or something. | Individuals who work in human service organizations can suffer from compassion fatigue. This in turn makes it difficult for those individuals to extend care to the people with whom they actually work. |
| 42. | PV: Just a couple of little things. Is there a goal to kind of create a caring organization? Or is it more of an *authentic* organization in terms of the life of the organization? | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 43. | P: See, I've worked in one organization where after a two-year intensive consultation we came to the realization that caring equaled carrying, and nobody was confronting some of the abuses and toxicity in that organization because they had to look to the outside world like "We're a caring organization because we belong to this kind of group of people, so we can't let the world know that we're really messed up and we hurt each other a lot." For me, it's about tapping into the potential of the people and creating an organization where people come to work and can bring their best. And it's possible, because I've been in those places, and I've led those places, and it's just amazing what happens. You want to be there, and you see the differences that can be made. And that doesn't always mean being nice to each other; it means being able to confront one another, and it means being able to be authentic with one another, and it means challenging people to bring their best. | In some human service organizations the capacity to care for one another does not extend to the employees themselves. This is a challenge because it is a contradictory view that they want to convey to the outside community. Overcoming this discrepancy requires hard work in the form of people being honest and direct with each other about their experiences in the organization. |
| 44. | P: I suppose it's about going back to nature and saying, "Do I want to hike on Vancouver Island where every second place I look has bald mountains because it's been clear-cut? Or is the effect of some kind of toxicity ruining the rivers that are around us?" And in my heart of hearts, I still think that I want to be a part of inspiring and creating places where people can be their best selves, and that's not an unrealistic thing. It means that it's a human self as well, but it's about being able to tolerate mistakes then and acknowledge them, and it's about being able to challenge one another, and also being able to step back and be conscious and reflective as an organization, saying, "________ we want to do as humans to look at our lives and see if we're meeting our own hopes and standards. And if we're not, well, at least to acknowledge and keep trying." [laughs] | Working for an organization means making a choice between working in an environment where life exists in the form of creativity, energy, and mutual respect or in an environment where the potential for life is "polluted" by mistrust, burnout, apathy, and an inability to reflect upon the purpose of the organization and the individuals working for the organization. |
| 45. | PV: One other question, just as you were talking: Is there any work or comments that you can make about the organization and its relationship to the broader community? Is there any kind of work or thinking that you do there—I'm just thinking about an organization that becomes quite insulated, has troubles. Any comments about that? | |

| | Excerpts from conversation | Reflective comments |
|---|---|---|
| 46. | P: The main thing for me when I look at an organization is, What does that organization exist for? And it's usually to provide some kind of service or some product to the community. And is it doing what it's purpose is? | Understanding why an organization exists and whether it meets the needs of the broader community is an extremely important factor to consider in assessing the organization's viability. |
| 47. | And another part for me—and I would say that especially in the call it human service organizations ________, whether it's medical, police, social workers, agencies—does it behave internally the same way as it says it's going to treat the people that it serves as well? because that can be a huge obstacle. So in that way it relates to the community because it either provides a service for the community and then has a positive impact—but if an organization's having a positive impact on the community, and at that same time beating up on its employees so there's a constant turnover and that, then I think it also has a responsibility to the people that are helping—that community—that happen. | An important question to ask those who work in a human services organizations is, "Is there a congruence between the way your organization treats its employees and the way it treats the people it purports to serve?" |

***Rough ground.*** During my initial conversation with Paula I was struck by the articulate manner in which she described her experiences. She discussed how being immersed in nature helped to strip away many of the internal and external expectations placed upon her in her day-to-day life. As these "encultured" expectations dissipated, she was given more opportunity to live in her own "essence," or, as she explained it, to "come home to myself." This involved a highly relational process in which she felt in communion or dialogue with something "much bigger" than herself. Paula resisted my request to try to put this experience into words and offered the notion that in entering nature she did not come with the expectation of putting her experience into words. In an overall sense Paula suggested that her experiences in nature serve as a touchstone and involve a reconnection and a sense of belonging to what is real and normal.

To enhance her experience in nature, Paula described the need to slow down and still her self. Within this stillness and personal silence Paula is able to observe and appreciate the life around her. She provided a lucid example of how the ice in the creek close to her home moves and acts in ways that help her to understand the structure of the universe. Paula also described how, within silence, the snow around her develops a particular subjectivity that not only invites her, but also *wants* to play with her. These experiences activate what might be described as Paula's "inner child" and initiate a desire to play, which brings tremendous joy. In the summer months, within the same conditions of silence and stillness, Paula experiences an empathy with the flowers that she observes, and she likened her own personal growth to that of the growth of a flower. She described this process as growing from the "inside out" and referred to the life force deep within her as the place "inside" where her personal growth originates.

Certainly the most challenging moment for me, and one that offers potential for further leaning, came near the end of our first conversation. I was summing up the content of our discussion and asked Paula whether she had anything else to add. She politely brought up the idea of gender and wondered out loud if this played a role in our conversation. Paula then referred to a book that describes the way that women interpret and understand their experience, and we then briefly discussed the differences that we may have in understanding the concept of self. I seem to try to clarify the self through specific language that demarcates boundaries and specific characteristics, whereas Paula understands the concept of self in a highly relational manner that lends itself to different language and different ways of understanding. When Paula thought that her husband might have been more able to answer my last question, I suddenly realized that my identity as a man had become implicated in my research!

In regards to her work as an organizational consultant, Paula brought forth a number of interesting insights into how her experiences in nature and her understanding of her *self* impact her work with people. She described the process of bringing the authentic self she experienced in nature to her work with people as "bringing her heart" to her work. This authenticity can be very threatening to the people with whom she works. Paula believed that some organizations find it difficult to tolerate this sense of realness and at times try to deny or thwart her attempts to be honest with the organization's employees. She also brings the sensitivity that she gains from her experiences in nature to her work by observing the various dynamics and patterns of communication that exist within organizations. The dynamics that she observes in nature are also representative of the dynamics that occur amongst people in an organization and often reflect the level of health or unhealth of an organization. Paula averred that an important part of her job is to reflect on both the functional and dysfunctional dynamics of an organization.

Paula likened the dynamics that exist within an organization to the four seasons inherent in nature: An organization with a clear vision and represented by its employees' creativity, commitment, and passion is in a spring or growth phase, whereas an organization that has lost grasp of its purpose and has reverted to maintaining and preserving its own existence is in a period of dormancy. Paula suggested that part of her role as an organizational consultant is to point out the discrepancy between the rhetoric the organization espouses and what is actually being done with the people it purports to serve. In many ways Paula seems to play a mediating role between the potential life-and-death drama that exists in every organization. She was quick to point out that this drama is reflected in the emotional state of the people who work in it. She clearly identified stressors that create "pollution" and adversely affect the health of an organization. She referred to these factors as *wounds* that stem from deep feelings of fear and vulnerability. Healing these wounds and mitigating their negative impact, Paula insisted, requires talking about these feelings. She emphasized that when employees of an organization share intense and potentially debilitating feelings, they must be responded to in a respectful manner. In Paula's view this is the most challenging time for organizational leaders because they must listen to the concerns of their employees in an open and nondefensive manner and then rely on the strengths rather [illegible] the limitations of both the individual person and the organization as a whole to overcome the wounds that prevent the organization from meeting its purpose.

In addition to Paula's description of factors that pollute the emotional environment of an organization, she also compared an organization in chaos to a hurricane. This refers to the tumultuous and extreme dynamism that exists in many organizations today. Similarly to dealing with the changes in her personal life, her experiences in witnessing the changes in nature help her to cope with the changes that seem to happen so quickly in an organization. She asserted that the challenges inherent in the change process present the choice of growth or decay in an organization. She portrayed the choice between life and decay in an organization to choosing either to hike in a lovely forested area or to walk on a hillside devastated by clear-cut foresting. I asked about the role of the organization in facilitating the choice of "life," and Paula argued that it is just as much the responsibility of the employees as it is of the organization to make a place for themselves in the organization that allows them to make choices that lead to creativity, passion, and commitment.

In terms of human service organizations, Paula discussed a phenomenon that she often encountered: Employees who work in human service organizations sometimes suffer from compassion fatigue, and they not only struggle to extend care to their clients, but also become deficient in offering care to their work colleagues. This leads to incongruence in an organization because the employees offer care only to their clients and not to each other and therefore lose their capacity to care for those they serve because they do not work in a supportive environment. In this case both clients and workers suffer. Paula described this phenomenon as an agency going against its own nature.

As I initially reflected upon my second conversation with Paula, I struggled with linking our conversation with my research topic. However, as I reread the interview transcript and wrote the reflective comments, I was struck by a number of things. In a very subtle but articulate way Paula was able to connect the notion of "life" and "meaning" with the way that an organization operates. Her experiences in nature "tuned" her in a way that allowed her to be sensitive to the dynamics in an organization that represent life. She was also very astute in pointing out ways of interacting that hamper life from flourishing in an organization, how the emotions of fear, mistrust, and apathy can have a suffocating effect upon the life of an organization. Paula also described how her experiences in nature have fortified her sense of her self and give her the strength and courage that she needs to contribute to the health of an organization. In an overall sense, what challenged me the most in my second conversation with Paula was that she was able to change and adapt her understanding of nature to the dynamics of the way an organization operates. This challenged me to question my tendency to think dualistically about nature as if it were something 'out there' and to consider that nature is, in fact, part of my everyday life—in both wilderness and urban environments.

## An Emerging Picture

My interviews with Donald, Rena, and Paula were both rewarding and challenging. It was very satisfying to engage in conversation with three people who share my interest in and passion for nature. Many times I felt a strong cognitive and emotional resonance with what these three articulate individuals shared with me. However, there were also times when I felt very challenged. In a hermeneutic sense, on several occasions I began to question my own horizons of understanding. During my conversations with Donald, Rena and Paula, there were times when I felt that I was walking into new territory. In these moments my way of understanding my research topic was seriously challenged, and as a result a number of new questions and ways of thinking about the concept of ecological identity surfaced for me. Although these new questions could be considered disorienting and problematic, they also could be considered an opportunity to study my research topic in more depth.

In an overall sense my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula reveal how an ecological identity arises first and foremost from a person's experience in nature. Language in many ways becomes secondary in that it represents an attempt to describe and come to know that experience. This became apparent very quickly in my first conversation with Donald. Initially, it was difficult to talk about the intellectual *concept* of ecological identity, but it became much easier when he began to discuss his *experience* in nature. As my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula progressed, they began to revolve around each person's experience in nature. Throughout these conversations I felt a particular sensitivity to the language that was used to describe theses experiences. For example, when my research participants used words such as *solace*, *sacrifice*, and *kinship* to describe their experiences in nature, I asked them to explain in more detail what these words meant to them. This sensitivity to language surfaces from an understanding of the gap between our experiences in the world and our ability to articulate them and from the hermeneutic understanding that the language used to describe experience is highly interpretable.

Because of the interpretability of language, the hermeneutic tradition holds that we cannot depend on language entirely on its own as a source of meaning. Coming to understand a particular experience involves a relational dynamic that transpires between two people. In part, meaning occurs when two people agree about the way that language describes a particular experience. During my interviews with Donald, Rena, and Paula, this occurred on a number of occasions. In my interview with Rena, I suddenly realized that the animals that watched her as she made her way to her vision quest site could be considered *witnesses*, and she wholeheartedly agreed. In my conversation with Paula we concurred that her experience in nature could be described as a process of "coming home." In my discussion with Donald I empathized deeply with his appreciation for the beauty in nature. We also came to a mutual understanding that our experiences in nature can be highly sensual. These examples do not demonstrate any particular "end point" in understanding, but, rather, offer what could be best described as potential sites for further exploration. For example, it might be helpful to understand the etymological roots of the word *witness* to develop a deeper understanding of the role that animals played in Rena's healing.

A number of themes also emerged from my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula. Our discussions about their experiences in nature and what it means to have an ecological identity evoked intense emotions from all three participants. Donald was very emotional in talking about his experiences as a young boy and referred to the grief that is associated with an ecological identity. Off tape, Paula admitted that she was surprised at the intensity of the emotion that surfaced for her during our conversation; and on tape, she described the intense feelings of joy and happiness that she experiences while playing in the snow in the creek close to her home. Rena was able to link the intense emotions associated with her own personal healing and transformation with the plant and animal "nations" that surrounded her.

During our conversations, all three participants also referred to their childhoods in one way or another. Donald remembered nature as a place of safety in his childhood. Paula associated emotions that she experiences when she spends time in nature as an adult with her childhood. Just before the recording of our first conversation, Rena referred to her first wondrous encounter in nature as a child.

Two other themes also emerged as a result of these interviews. All three participants approach nature from an intensely relational point of view. In addition, all three participants use their experiences in nature to support and guide them in their day-to-day lives. Donald suggested that humans should engage in a relationship with nature from the standpoint of devotion, commitment, and love, similar to that in a marriage. Paula reported that the sense of self that she experiences in nature is in fact maintained and sustained through her relationship with her immediate surroundings. Rita clearly connected her personal healing with the natural environment. She articulately explained that healing needs to be accompanied by a ritual of appreciation that acknowledges her relationship to the earth. All three participants also use their experiences in nature to live and work in a manner that is congruent with these experiences. Paula brings the authentic self that she experiences in nature to her work with organizations. Rena, on the other hand, felt that her encounters in nature help her to know herself in a more intimate fashion and that this in turn helps her in her counseling practice because it allows her to bring her "full" self to the helping process. Finally, Donald described his time in an alpine meadow as helping to rejuvenate him in a way that allows him to bring a sense of appreciation and meaning to his day-to-day life and to be more sensitive to the inner ecology of his clients that he so creatively described.

What also struck me throughout my interviews with my research participants was the way in which they approach nature. Donald saw himself as a visitor in the alpine meadow and referred to the beauty that surrounds him. Paula viewed going to the creek close to her home as visiting an old friend. Rena considered the other living entities around her as having a particular subjectivity that is unique to each animal, tree, and plant and understood her experience in nature as a continuous dialogue with these entities. It seems in an overall sense that meaningful contact with nature always took place when the individual was alone and that being silent was much more important than engaging in the impossible task of trying to describe the experience.

In regards to language, I was struck on a number of occasions by its role in both the meaning-making efforts of the participants and my own attempts to understand what they were trying to say. Donald was very skeptical of any 'expert' language that claims to definitively foster an understanding of the human experience in nature. I found Rena's way of describing her experience in nature much different from mine in that the language that she used always placed her "in relationship" and never assumed the position of an independent and autonomous "I." Certainly the most dramatic incident regarding the use of language surfaced in my interview with Paula when she suggested that the language that I used to describe an ecological identity and the questions that I asked might have been influenced by my gender and that this made it difficult for her to relate to them at times.

Overall, my conversations with Donald, Paula, and Rena were filled with rich dialogue that offered many opportunities for new learning. In my initial reflection on these interviews, a picture of ecological identity emerged. An individual's ecological identity arises from his or her experience in nature. This experience encompasses a highly relational process that is built upon the notion that nature in fact has something to say or, in a hermeneutic sense, has the potential to make a claim upon a person. This relational experience is both sensual and kinesthetic and leads to a way of knowing that relies more upon intuition and perception than upon reason. Our experience in nature can encompass a wide range of emotions, including both grief and joy. In addition, our experiences in nature can have a great impact on the way that we think about ourselves and influence our decisions on how we choose to lead our lives.

In this regard experiences in nature allow the opportunity for humans to discover not only their similarities with other sentient life, but also their differences. It appears that engaging in a meaning-making relationship with nature can precipitate an experience of place that evokes notions of kinship, association, and a sense of commonality with all life. My conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula reveal that an experience in nature can lead a person to ask bigger questions related to our place in the cosmos and the relationship between our individual "selves" and a greater whole. In all three cases it also became apparent that experiences in nature offer an ontological understanding that leads to the emergence of an ethic of care and respect.

In an overall sense, ecological identity emerges from our experiences in nature and is manifested in the language claims that we make about ourselves as a result of these experiences. However, the language that describes ecological identity is problematic in that it does not completely and utterly reflect our experience. Gadamer (1994) contended that our experience is always thwarted by our expectation to describe it. There are always gaps, nuances, and subtleties in the language of ecological identity that require further interpretation. The language that we use to describe these experiences also becomes suspect as we begin to understand the way that prejudice and bias impact the way that we interpret these experiences. In this respect, any attempt to understand the meaning that we gain from our experiences in nature requires a careful assessment of the role that language plays in either helping or hindering our understanding of our research topic.

In reflecting upon this emerging picture, I believe that it may initially seem difficult to determine a future direction for further interpretive work. However, as we have seen in Chapter 3, the hermeneutic endeavor takes its direction from the actual phenomenon that is being studied. As our understanding of our experience in nature emerges and a discussion about ecological identity continues, a number of potential "points of entry" reveal themselves. Certainly the language within the ecological identity discourse needs further scrutiny. In a hermeneutic sense it would also be important to highlight the role of history in our attempts to define ourselves as ecological beings. A hermeneutic accounting also requires that I explore the times when I was struck or surprised by what the participants shared with me. These times of Strangeness, when the crust of my conventional understanding was challenged, provided the opportunity to expand my own horizons. Finally, the narratives of Donald, Rena, and Paula can be used extensively as a compass not only to guide my research efforts, but also to point to new directions of understanding. In the next chapter I continue to rely upon these conversations to guide my exploration. In the final portion of Chapter 5, I will offer a reconceptualization of what it means to have an ecological identity; and in Chapter 6, I will turn my attention to how my newfound understanding can be used in the service of helping others.

# CHAPTER 5:

# UNEARTHING THE MEANING IN LANGUAGE

## Introduction

This chapter encompasses a hermeneutic rendering of the concept of ecological identity. This hermeneutic account primarily revolves around the set of conversations I had with three social workers whom I have fictitiously named Donald, Rena, and Paula. Initially, however, I explore an historical consciousness that includes not only a linguistic history but also an organic history. I then turn my attention to the language that is used in the ecological-identity discourse. By exploring this language and expanding the hermeneutic notion of historical consciousness, I hope to "open up" my topic in a way that will allow new ways of understanding to emerge. Following this initial section I return to my interviews with Donald, Paula, and Rena and begin to "unearth" the meaning in our conversations by focusing upon particular "events" that transpired during these conversations. These events are characterized by times when I was struck or surprised by what they shared with me and challenged the way that I thought about my research topic. After this analysis I return to a wilderness setting myself to reflect upon and integrate my learning that has resulted from these conversations. In the final portion of this chapter I identify five questions that emerge as a result of this research endeavor and briefly answer each one in the hopes that this facilitates a deeper conversation related to what the concept of ecological identity means.

## Forgotten Identity

Since its beginning, the human relationship with the "more-than-human world" has been deeply intertwined. This relationship initially involved a physical adaptation but soon encompassed a social and cultural adaptation as well. As humans populated the globe, the earth was obviously a source of physical sustenance, but as time went on, it also became a source of deep existential meaning. In the perennial philosophies of the world that emerged between approximately AD 500 and AD 1500, the concept of *nature* played an important role in understanding the human endeavor. Because humans are essentially meaning-making beings, it is no surprise that the earth, sky, and very life processes around them became a significant pedagogical source. How nature has been defined and interpreted within these traditions has varied, but one common theme emerges: All of these traditions argue that ignoring or denying our relationship with the natural world leads to human alienation and suffering.

Oelschlaeger (1991) pointed out that the modernist view of the world contrasts with what was once a more compassionate, holistic, and balanced view of humans and nature. Although the debate over the essential cosmology of primal peoples continues, Oelschlaeger argued that there is ample evidence to suggest that most societies in prehistory and those emerging into the historical period were infused with an organic, nature-oriented cosmology that expressed itself in all of life's activities. Merchant (1992) suggested that sacred organic cosmologies ordered the lives of most hunter/gatherer and pre-enlightenment people and helped determine their values. In addition, these organic cosmologies provided a framework for both an individual and a social ethic. It might be considered problematic to think about returning to, these ancient ways of understanding and living in the world, but anthropologist Herbert Schneidau (1976) contended that early peoples must be appreciated for their demonstrated capacity to live well within their organic framework and for their ability to develop sophisticated social structures based upon their relationship with the natural world.

Many of the ecophilosophies that have emerged over the past 50 years have drawn attention to the schism or divide that has emerged between humans and the world around them. Many argue that the anthropocentric fallacy inherent in the Western tradition has left us with a narrow and limited understanding of ourselves. Fox (1990) described anthropocentrism, which assumes that the universe is essentially human centered, as "human self-importance" (p. 9) and suggested that it has been the single deepest and most persistent assumption of the Western philosophical, social, and political traditions. Anthropocentrism differentiates persons from the environment in which they live and from all other creatures on earth. Anthropocentrism understands people as masters of their own destinies who are capable of independently and individually choosing goals that meet their self-interests. From this perspective the natural environment is seen as devoid of any subjective, experiential reality (Griffin, 1988). Creating this dichotomy between humans and the natural environment has narrowed the conceptualization of both people and their environment: "Nature has been removed from our understanding of environment and from our understanding of person" (Besthorn, 1997, p. 25). Berman (1984) succinctly described the schism that has transpired between Western humanity and nature:

> There is no ecstatic merger with nature, but rather total separation from it. Subject and object are always seen in opposition to each other. I am not my experiences, and thus not really a part of the world around me . . . . Everything is an object, alien, not me; and I am ultimately an object too, an alienated 'thing' in a world of other, equally meaningless things . . . . The cosmos cares nothing for me, and I don't really feel a sense of belonging to it. What I feel is a sickness in the soul. (p. 3)

The Western tradition is steeped with beliefs that have led to what Sessions (1995b) referred to as the "anthropocentric detour" (p. 156). The origins of the anthropocentric detour are complex and have emerged throughout the histories of our philosophical, religious, economic, and epistemological traditions. Aristotle originally linked human identity to substance that precipitated a schism between human identity and spirit that is still is with us today. Rene Descartes, often considered the founder of Western philosophy, professed a way of understanding the world that emphasized reason over emotion and objectivity over subjectivity and left humans stuck in the confines of their own minds (Lease, 1995). In "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," cultural historian Lynn White (1973) wrote a well-known and provocative paper that linked the environmental crisis with core beliefs inherent in Christianity. Generally, White's argument revolved around the Christian belief of a "god in heaven" that despirited nature by creating a split between heaven and earth that made it easier to consider a form of nature that could be controlled, managed, and used for personal salvation.

In an ironic sense the anthropocentric fallacy may leave humans at the centre of things, but it has also left them detached, isolated, and uncommunicative with the natural world. Abram (1996) suggested that this is similar to an autistic state because humans fail to engage the world fully, and, as a result, their understanding of themselves and the world around them becomes jeopardized. In a similar manner Evernden (1992) argued that anthropocentric fallacy leads to a "fragile division" (p. 88) that separates humans and nature and limits the way that humans can interpret themselves. Human identity in the 21s century has been described as constricted, contrived, narrow, fractured, hollow, and incapable of developing any salience in this postmodern world. The precarious ways in which human identity has emerged raise significant questions about our ability to meet the serious ecological and social challenges that we face today.

One way to move beyond the narrow interpretations of identity that humans have created for themselves is to return to our experience in nature. The text of the conversations presented in Chapter 4 represents a continuing attempt to understand our identity as human beings in the context of the natural world. It can be argued that this quest might be redundant in that this endeavor has already taken place over thousands of years, and there are no new questions to be answered. As we have seen in philosophical hermeneutics, however, meaning always takes on a new dimension in relation to the time and place in which it emerges. These conversations must be seen in a different light than perhaps they might have been 50 or 100 years ago. They are embedded in a time and place of a looming environmental crisis and are accompanied by the persistent human challenges of poverty and social injustice.

## Evolutionary Consciousness

As we have seen in Chapter 3, the hermeneutic tradition emphasizes the essential role of history in how we create meaning in our lives. In hermeneutic terms, language always speaks the history from which it emerges. With regard to ecological identity, however, a form of organic history must also be taken into account. Merchant (1989) asserted that any understanding of human identity must include nature as an historical actor, which provides an approach that challenges the anthropocentric world view by focusing upon the highly dialectical processes that occurs among living and nonliving things. In Merchant's view these processes encompass an interchange of energy, materials, and information. "Through biogeochemical cycles, oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, phosphorus, sulfur and other elements circulate through living and non living things" (p. 7). These processes and specific molecular and chemical compounds circulate through both living and nonliving things. Merchant emphasized the idea that nonhuman nature is indeed not passive, but an active complex that changes over time and responds to human behavior. The relationship between human beings and the nonhuman world is highly reciprocal. Humans adapt to nature, but nature adapts to humans as well. In this regard an ecological view of nature asserts the evolutionary process that has transpired between humans and the natural world since the beginning of time.

For humans to understand themselves in terms of their temporal place in the universe, Seed and Fleming (1988) called for "evolutionary remembering" (p. 45). They argued that evolutionary remembering can be a way of overcoming the anthropocentric tendency to see our selves as the centre of all things. In a very poetic manner, Seed and Fleming described the evolutionary process and the human place in it:

> Let us go back, way back before the birth of our planet Earth, back to the mystery of the universe coming into being. We go back 13,500 million years to a time of primordial silence, . . . of emptiness, . . . before the beginning of time, . . . the very ground of all being . . . . From this state of immense potential, an unimaginably powerful explosion takes place . . . . Energy traveling at the speed of light hurtles in all directions, creating direction, creating the universe.
>
> All that is now, every galaxy, star and planet, every particle existing comes into being at this great fiery birthing. Every particle which makes up you and me comes into being at this instant and has been circulating through countless forms ever since, born of this great cauldron of creativity. (p. 45)

Seed and Fleming argued that evolutionary remembering allows people to reconsider their identity because we begin to understand ourselves in a much broader temporal and organic context. In their view this can lead to a sense of awe, humility, and inspiration for those willing to engage in the process.

Physicist David Bohm (1980) captured this evolutionary process very clearly and descriptively. According to Bohm, the universe is originally implicated or enfolded, and what we observe in the everyday world is the explicit order; that is, that which has been explicated or unfolded. The implicate order is continually unfolding, becoming explicate. Behind the explicate order the implicate order is always present; the whole universe is implicated behind every explicit form. All the atoms and molecules, organs and organisms of the universe were already implicit from the very beginning of the universe. Because the explicit (that which we see) universe is unfolding from the implicate order, everything at the level of the implicate order is interrelated. This means that we are living in a universe that is co-coordinated and integrated, which suggests an intelligibility that humans have tried to grasp since the advent of human history. It is important to note that, although Bohm is a physicist, he called for a spiritual dimension in our lives that questions our place in this enfolded and unfolding universe. He suggested that meditation and other spiritual practices can help us to understand our place in this dynamic and highly interrelated context.

Capra (1976) argued that humans can explore philosophical questions related to their place in the world by paying attention to their experience. He clearly described how Eastern mystics, through meditation and other forms of practice, are able to experience the world in a way that leads them to ask questions similar to those that Bohm's work (for example) and modern physics in general raise. Experience can be seen as a path to understanding human identity in the context of a universe that operates as an integrated whole. Capra proposed that experience can substantiate the unity of all things and can confirm the essentially dialectical relationship between part and whole. Experience can also reveal the fluidity of our identity as human beings because it exists in a dynamic universe. Indeed, paying attention to experience can lead humans to understand their place in the universe in a profound and deeply meaningful way.

History plays an important role in understanding ecological identity in two important ways. Not only does history reside in the very language we use to describe ecological identity, but it also plays an important role in the development of both our organic and conscious selves. The first signs of life that emerged on the planet contained the original subatomic matter that existed at the beginning of the universe. Even in this present day we all have within ourselves the basic structure of the universe. What is important to note is that through the evolutionary process involving time, space, and matter, human consciousness also emerged. Rozak (1995) suggested that human consciousness is a phenomenon that emerged as a result of the evolutionary processes. At the point where human consciousness developed and humans gained control of the matter of their bodies, the question of human identity became possible.

## The Language of Ecological Identity

If we hope to understand a particular phenomenon in more depth, we must understood the "aliveness" inherent in the language that is used to describe that phenomenon. As we have seen in philosophical hermeneutics, language is infused with the history from which it emerges and represents the ideals, beliefs, and values of the people who have spoken these words in the past. Language is also interpreted through the cultural lens and traditions in which it is used and, as a result, contains biases about how the world should or should not be understood. In our day-to-day lives we see how language can be interpreted differently by different people and how it can be used in ways to enhance a certain point of view or sustain a particular way of understanding the world. A closer look at the language used in the ecological-identity discourse reveals the dynamic and multilayered character of words such as *nature, ecology, identity*, and *self*. Exploring the history, bias, and interpretability of these words will not only expose the challenges associated with coming to understand the topic of ecological identity, but also help to reveal potentially new ways of understanding this interesting concept.

Evernden (1992) provided an excellent historical view of the concept of nature. In a general sense he tracked how the concept of nature changed dramatically between the medieval period and the empiricism of the 17th century. He described how the notion of an empathized world was lost or, in his words, dismissed by the rise of a new abstracted system called *nature*. Evernden pointed out that the word *nature* originated from the Greek word *phusis* which refers to the world as "everything"; but for a number of reasons this expansive idea was eventually lost. In this regard nature became a container of sorts that could be talked about and relegated to mean a thing or set of things. Nature became a single object that could be discussed, befriended, and analyzed. In this regard the notion of nature as everything was lost and, along with it, certain purity as it fell into the linguistic hands of humans.

In the hands of humans the object or container of nature was cleansed by disallowing projections of humanlike qualities onto nature or prohibiting any of the older empathic or intuitive ways of understanding the world. Evernden (1992) argued that, with the exclusion of all human qualities and of the older means of knowing nature, the locus of knowledge shifted from the world to humans:

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> Nature is, in effect, redefined and the means of knowing nature are utterly transformed. Perhaps most important, the very concept of knowing is subtly altered, for knowledge is no longer an intuition of shared properties or of meanings beyond appearances, but a deduction of systemic rules from a new blueprint of nature. (p. 56)

This dualistic notion that separates humans as subjects and nature as object prevails as "common sense" in our modern and postmodern lives. It is deeply embedded in our cultural heritage and leads us to make assumptions about ourselves and reality. Evernden (1992) argued that common sense of this kind "is actually a rarefied faculty, heir to centuries of theoretical explanation" (p. 109). More poignant, Evernden suggested that this "common sense is an *interpretation* of experience as an encounter of an inner self and outer objects" (p. 109) This is an important point, because in a hermeneutic sense Evernden was suggesting that our interpretation of *nature* is based upon an erroneous assumption based in language that differentiates between subject and object. More important, he argued that this assumption is not congruent with our lived experience. He referred to the work of Kohak (1978; as cited in Evernden, 1992), who made the point that

> the world is indeed there, in lived experience, but that experience is not an ephemeral, transparent nonrealm between a subjective mind and an objective world. Nor is it a passive subjectivity report of an autonomously existing objective reality. It is reality, the only reality that is actually given in experience rather than constructed in speculation. (p. 33)

Evernden's (1992) work is instructive in that he clearly laid out how the word *nature* comes to us through history with a particular bias or prejudice that has seeped deeply into our cultural understanding of our relationship with the world. When we use the word nature and the meaning that has been ascribed to it, we tend to confirm our primary world as reality and as a result ignore the primary *life* world of experience. With this denial, Evernden argued, "the horizon of our world contracts to a fraction of its original scope" (p. 108). This has serious consequences because humans are left out of the realm of nature standing on the periphery of an objectified, distant world. In this regard we continue to observe nature and never consider that perhaps nature can observe us or that it has any subjectivity that can make a claim upon us. In a poetic way Evernden suggested that restoring subjectivity in nature requires "loosening of the conceptual bindings, of nature so that subjectivity can flow back in, like water to a scorched garden" (p. 108)

Tomashow's (1995) introduction of the concept of *ecological* identity was an attempt to overcome the constraints imposed on human identity by the socially created "nature as container" perspective. The use of the word ecological may have been a way of expanding the possibilities of human identity by offering a more comprehensive and broader view of nature. As we have seen, the word *ecology* has Greek origins and stems from the word *oikus*, which means "house" or "household." From this perspective, our identity emerges from our experience in the "household" rather than possibly a more limited experience of identification with nature as an object. Although the use of the word ecology does seem to open up new possibilities for the understanding of a human identity, it does come with limitations as well. The word ecology seems to suggest that there are indeed limits to the household in which we live and that the myriad of relationships of which we are a part have an end or distinct boundary. The container of nature just seems to have grown bigger. The connotation of limits is incongruent with our understanding of the earth and its relationship with the rest of the universe. The earth is not a closed system that operates in a defined and determined space but, instead, is an open system that encompasses the sun, the universe, and beyond. This perspective challenges us to reconsider the way that we think about human identity because it presents the notion of identity that is based upon the possibility of infinite connection rather than the more constricted view that the words *nature* and *ecology* seem to connote.

It is interesting to note how the word ecology and its abbreviated version *eco* have become commonplace in the vernacular of Western society. *Eco* is ironically used to sell products and encourage traveling to exotic destinations, and, generally, supports behavior that is destructive of the ecology of the world. The word ecology has also emerged in the lexicon of many professional fields such as medicine, architecture, psychology, and social work. On a positive note, this might be considered evidence that humans are beginning to understand their place in a highly relational world and are trying to serve society in a way that acknowledges this premise. Morito (2002) however, argued that using the word ecology does not necessarily mean that an individual or group of individuals is indeed *thinking* ecologically. In his opinion, humans find it difficult to act in an ecological way because they still assume a scientific stance that denies our emotional, perceptive, and emotional experience in nature. In this regard we fail to become "attuned" to the possibilities that exist in thinking ecologically, and we become limited and narrow in the way that we address not only environmental problems, but also social problems.

Evernden (1992, pp. 9-10) averred that those who argue for an environmental ethic or an environmentally sustainable lifestyle based upon ecological principles tend to forget or deny the natural processes of exclusion, competition, and other survival-related behavior in their arguments. Given the role of competition in the evolutionary process, he suggested that it would be just important to emphasize this exploitive notion as much as it would be to emphasize the communal notions of symbiosis and cooperation. Evernden's point is that it is important in that it suggests that by denying the "darker side" of ecology, well-intentioned environmentalists inadvertently formulate a new ecology that better serves their purposes. Evernden argued that this practice clearly demonstrates how the word ecology can be used for different purposes. The scientific view helps to perpetuate the guise of understanding nature to control and exploit it, and, on the other hand, the word ecology is also manipulated in a way that justifies an argument for living a certain way. Both of these arguments are also supported by the assumption that they are object and value neutral.

Using the word *ecological* to describe identity raises other difficulties as well. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the etymological root of the word *identity* refers to the notion of sameness. In a psychoanalytic sense it is easier to understand our identity when there is a particular object to identify with, but it becomes more difficult to determine identity when it involves identifying with the household—*oikus*—or greater whole. Sarup (1996) contended that this is one of the limitations of thinking about identity in only subject-object terms, that a particular identity must always be considered in the time and space in which it is articulated. By this Sarup meant that identity must not only be reduced to the simple notion of focusing upon similarities but also include people's general experiences in the multilayered and essentially relational world in which they live.

The words *identity* and *self* are also very contentious words and often take on different meanings depending on one's perspective. Not only are the words themselves contentious, but Clayton and Opotow (2003) also suggested that the relationship between the two terms is often vague and confusing. In fact, the concepts of identity and self are often used interchangeably in the research literature. Baumeister (1997) explained how the self was invented in the early days of the development of the profession of psychology. Psychology reified the concept of self by suggesting that a person could be conscious of the self and that this self has both a public and a private component. Shortly afterwards, the notion of ego from psychoanalytic theory became associated with the self, and in the process entrenched the idea of self and set in motion what Baumeister referred to as a journey into selfhood from which humans have not recovered.

It is important to understand the assumptions that the language of identity and self seem to imply. The word identity seems to create boundaries around a particular psychological space called the self. The assumption of an autonomous, independent self is, by and large, a Western social construct. Even in our own lives, if we were asked to describe our self, it would be very difficult. If we made an attempt to do so, we would invariably refer to the relationships in our lives that help us to define who we are. Ricoeur (1992) argued that any attempt to define the self must be considered in the context and presence of and in interaction with an Other. In Ricoeur's view the self exists only because of the dynamics that emerge from within the relationship between self and other. In a similar light Smith (1999a) reminded us of the Buddhist notion of the self as an illusionary phenomenon because it exists and co-emerges only because of its interdependent relationship with all Others. Smith stated:

> It is not that there is no Self and Other, as in the one-turn negation, but rather that the formulation puts the emphasis in the wrong place. There is a place where Self and Other cannot be identified separately because the moment one is identified, so too in that very instant is the other named or brought forward. The game of trying to separate them is one, not just of futility, but worse, or utter violence, because

> they are always everywhere co-emergent, with a denial of one being a denial of the other. (p. 465)

Many other theoretical and philosophical perspectives could be called upon to discuss the words of nature, ecology, self, and identity. Whereas this is not meant to be an exhaustive exploration of these concepts, it does point to the fact that the language inherent in the ecological-identity discourse is highly interpretive. The language of ecological identity has a myriad of meanings, and different people use it differently for different purposes. In semiotic terms it is apparent that there is a great deal of "slippage" between these words as signifiers and what they actually signify. Thus the chain of signifiers used within the ecological-identity discourse is not as definitive as one would like to believe. Whereas this high level of relativism could be seen as an obstacle, the hermeneutic challenge is to consider it as an opportunity. This challenge calls upon my ability to tap the potential of shared meaning that transpired between myself and my research participants and then apply this shared meaning to the "life world" in which our conversations took place. In addition, the hermeneutic challenge requires that I "play along" within the parameters set out by the language contained within the ecological-identity discourse.

Working within the realm of the ecological-identity discourse certainly requires a high level of creativity, but it also requires a specific sensitivity that other research endeavors might not include. I had to be sensitive to what seemed different and strange in my conversations with the research participants rather than what is common or normal. It also meant that the research endeavor had to be guided by the questions that a particular conversation was attempting to answer rather than be led by the false promises of a "right" answer. In an overall sense a hermeneutic account of the concept of ecological identity must be thorough and built upon the rigors associated with a scholarly process. Coming to understand this topic, however, should never meet with the assumption that there will be a time when there is nothing left to say about this concept.

## Interpretive Moments

> The ordinary events of our lives are always and already full of relations, full of the whole complex of human inheritance, full of voices, and spooks and spirits and desires and tongues, and full of inheritances for beyond the human voice, rivers and soil edges and the coming of this solstice storm. Small events thus become potentially "fecund," presenting themselves as gates or ways in to the luscious roil beneath the skin of familiarity. (Jardine, 2000, pp. 106-107)

Exploring the language of ecological identity and the role of history (in both linguistic and organic ways) provides a rich landscape in which to discuss the concept of ecological identity. In a metaphoric sense the two preceding sections of this chapter help to "cultivate" the ground upon which this discussion takes place by "loosening up" the sedimented meanings associated with the language of ecological identity and bringing more "space" to the discussion by opening up a myriad of possible ways of thinking about this subject. From this fertile ground we return to my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula to explore what ecological identity means to them. I will explore a number of events or interpretive moments that transpired during our conversations that gave me an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of my research topic.

I did not select these interpretive moments on a random basis, but chose them in a manner that was congruent with the tenets of the hermeneutic tradition. I focused upon moments that either resonated with me or struck me as being strange or different from the way that I understood the concept of ecological identity. I identify questions that seemed to emerge as a result of the conversation that was taking place. In addition, I bring a particular sensitivity to how language is used in our conversation and how it either helped or hindered my conversation with the research participants. Finally, I discuss the times when my own biases and prejudices surfaced and how they impacted the research process itself.

### *Donald: Grief, Awe, and the Capacity to Experience*

During my initial conversation with Donald, he shared his sadness with me about the rapid destruction of our natural environment. This had an emotional impact on me as well, and I began to feel my own grief related to this matter. These feelings of grief stayed with me for several days and led me to wonder about the role of grief in the development of an ecological identity. I also felt a strong resonance with Donald's description of the beauty that surrounded him in an alpine meadow he had once visited. The way that he talked about his experience in the meadow seemed to be an answer to the question, "What is the experience of awe?" In the final stages of my first conversation with Donald, he eloquently described humans as "musical instruments" who have the capacity to be finely tuned to the natural world. This description made me think about experience as a process that involves "receiving" the world in a way and allowed me to reflect upon the question of identity in a particular way.

During my conversation with Donald, it was clear that his ecological identity as a human being has emerged from his relationship with nature. He described this relationship as one that has transpired over time and explained that when he was a young boy, nature had provided him with a safe place away from the "slings and arrows" of his childhood. He compared his relationship with nature to that in a marriage and argued that our relationship with nature requires a particular "devotion of attention." In addition, Donald viewed his experience in nature as deeply sensual, one that touches every part of his body and does not require a great deal of thinking. In my view, when Donald described his experience in nature, he was essentially depicting a relationship born of love. It is deeply satisfying, reassuring, unconditional, and a source of great personal meaning.

Nicholsen (2002) suggested that our love for nature is accompanied by a deep emotional and spiritual vulnerability. Loving nature in a world of unmitigated environmental destruction bears a pain that is often unspeakable. The grief that we experience leaves us feeling helpless and can easily cause us to withdraw. The pain and resulting words that are so difficult to speak plunge us into silence. We become faced with the difficult task of making sense of a relationship that is born of love but leaves us open to so much pain. Donald revealed this pain in the initial part of our first conversation through his tears and then later empathized with Mother Theresa, who, he suggested, must have lived with this type of grief every day.

Left undisclosed, our grief can turn into shame. Perhaps this is what Donald referred to when he shared that he prefers kinship with other living entities to that with human beings. He was angry and grief stricken about the role that humanity has played in the destruction of the natural environment and perhaps felt shame about being a member of the human community. Fisher (2002) argued that this type of shame, although hidden, is endemic in Western culture. In an overall sense there is an awareness of what humans are doing to the natural world that translates into emotions of impotence because, in our own biased and constricted perspective, there is nothing that we can do about it. This feeling of impotence leads not only to shame, but also to a sense of hopelessness.

"It is taboo to express one's feeling for the natural world too strongly" (Nicholsen, 2002, p. 11). Despite this taboo, it is essential that we find the words and gather the courage to talk about these feelings of grief. We can easily turn our feelings of grief and shame into anger against ourselves and perhaps others. In this regard we can easily enter a cycle of self-destructive and perhaps apathetic behavior that not only destroys the environment, but also ourselves in return. These feelings must not be hidden but, rather, brought to the "light of day." When they are not heard, they become more hidden, and the more hidden they become, the more difficult they are to share. These feelings become barriers to our own life processes and prevent us from living our lives in an ecologically determined manner. It becomes too difficult to care and too difficult to reach out to others because it is too painful.

Our ecological identity in part arises from this suffering. In essence, we are identifying with life as we experience the suffering of other life forms. Being in relationship with nature in these challenging times means that we will suffer, and our capacity to experience and suffer pain is then crucial. If we cannot cope with our pain, it will be difficult for us to be fully present to nature. In this regard we cannot suffer in isolation by hiding our pain and not speaking the truth. This will only exacerbate our agony and prevent us from opening ourselves up to the "gift" of nature. Like those human beings who have suffered at the hands of abuse and neglect, we must express our pain, and this pain must be heard and admitted to be true.

Donald also spoke passionately about the beauty of nature. He described it as an "original" art form and suggested that the art in the museums of London and New York pale in comparison to the beauty of a patch of lichen that he had observed in the mountain wilderness. He lamented that he had no words to describe the impact of this beauty on him, and he seemed both confounded and in awe as a result of this experience. Nicholsen (2002) articulately described the experience of being in awe:

> Awe is the sense of an encounter with some presence larger than ourselves, mysterious, frightening and wonderful, numinous, sacred. It is the sense of something that we are not capable of containing within our capacity for thought and speech. In awe, one's self is felt only as something small and incapable, speechless, perhaps graced by the experience but unequal to it, humble. (p. 16)

The experience of awe stops us in our tracks and leaves us speechless. The experience associated with awe does not immediately present itself with any clear meaning, but it is precisely at this point that we must not become complacent. It is within this initial experience of awe that we are tempted to stop and capture the "Kodak moment." But the experience of awe is only a beginning, not an end, and can be the beginning of a path to emotional growth. Because we are unable to put our experiences into words, the self "holds something in readiness for the future" (p. 19), and we may eventually be able to express our experiences and share them with others. At the very moment of awe, however, we are challenged by our capacity to tolerate the encounter with something greater than our present selves. It challenges our capacity to tolerate our own humility and weakness. Only when we are able to remain present to the experience of awe will we be able to harvest the meaning it has to offer us.

Donald described this experience of awe that he felt when he looked at a patch of lichen in an alpine meadow. His experience is instructive in that he was by himself and had no words to describe what he was feeling. This suggests that his relation to the natural world is in part nonverbal and unspoken. Nicholsen (2002) suggested that this experience lends itself to the question, "How indeed do I express and live my relatedness to the nonhuman?" (p. 19). She pointed out that this absence of language puts the self into question. What self did Donald bring to his relationship with this patch of lichen? It seems that something is left behind, but at the same time something else emerges. In this encounter the mystery of self and the "Other" emerges, and we are compelled to explore this experience in a deeper way

When I queried Donald about his relationship with nature, he was clear in stating that it does not encompass an experience of fusion but, rather, an experience of feeling related and different at the same time. Evernden (1992) explained that we alternate between a sense of larger identification with the sense of self and a sense of separateness and otherness. On one end of this spectrum is a sense of identification with nature that expands the self and includes all life forms. On the other end is the experience of difference, what Evernden called the "radical astonishment" (p. 111) of the other. Wilber (1979) suggested that the argument of whether our encounter with nature leads to an expanded self that includes the other or to a more differentiated self that involves a dramatic encounter with the other is essentially a dualistic argument. Both Wilber and Nicholsen contended that both the differentiated and the nondifferentiated self are present in our experience with nature. Snyder (1990) viewed this as a delicate balance that requires "not becoming one or mixing things up but holding the sameness and difference delicately in mind" (p. 180).

Snyder (1990) suggested that this confluence between our selves and the world occurs within a threshold of silence. Donald was by himself in the primordial silence of the alpine meadow, and within this silence or emptiness the beauty of the lichen came to greet him. The form of the lichen came from interplay between emptiness and form.

Buddhists have described this emptiness as the fertile void (Almaas, 1986) and from this void all things (10,000 living things) come and all things (mountains, seas, animals, and humans) return. The void represents the silence inherent in life, the part that we cannot explain from which all things come and pass. The fertility of the void suggests that this silence does not represent emptiness, but rather life itself. When we identify with this fertile void, we are in essence identifying and merging with life itself.

Identifying or merging with the fertile void is no easy task. Ecopyschologist Andrew Fisher (2002) suggested that our ego is in a constant battle between the need to exist for itself as a separate entity and the desire not to exist—to become the whole to prevent the pain of separation. This interplay represents the human ambivalence to experiencing a deeper relationship with nature. There exists the fear that the self will be lost to the nonverbal, mysterious silence of the void. But to deny this is to deny life. This is what we have in common with all other life on the planet. David Loy (1992a) advised that we can overcome this fear of the void by learning to live with it. It is only when we give, or perhaps, more clearly, release, our egos to the void that we will be able to understand ourselves as being in relation to others.

Perhaps this is the source of what Donald described as the commonality he felt with nature. He was referring to the similar nonverbal, silent place from which all life emerges. Like all "others," he too emerged from the void. In a more specific sense, he too shared the same life force that transforms silence into form and form into life. Donald described his foray into the silence of nature, during which he became acutely aware of the community of life around him. He seemed to become a part of the greater community of life. Fisher (2002) called this notion of community a "continuum of kinship" (p. 95) in which we are neither separate from nor fused with nature, but rather participants with nature.

In the latter part of our first interview Donald gave an illuminating example of our human interaction in the world. He suggested that we come into existence with the potential to both receive and "play" the music (life force) inherent in the world. He compared humans to finely tuned instruments that, through their "construction and design," can both receive and emit this life force in a creative and meaningful way. Donald believed that the more we become attuned to the "ways of nature," the more we will learn the universal principles running through our lives. We learn that life is always a changing, dynamic, cyclical phenomenon and that our meaning-making endeavors are a part of this process.

This life force or energy has been given different names in different traditions. Taoism named it the *Tao*, the early Greeks referred to it as *Physis* (spirit), Christian scriptures refer to it as *God*, and Buddhism calls it *Dharma*. Although each of these traditions interprets this life force differently, they consistently understand it as an energy or life force that gives both order and meaning to the universe. In regard to ecological identity, we witness this life energy in the natural world. As we journey outward into the more-than-human realm, we are given the opportunity to learn more about this life force and its role in our lives.

From the very beginning of our lives this life force pulsates through our physical, emotional, and spiritual selves. It is an autonomous force that exists everywhere and in everything. It is intangible and indescribable and represents the great mystery that all religious and philosophical traditions have attempted to understand and respect. This intangibility, however, does not mean that we cannot recognize it in our lives. We can discover it through our own embodied experience. Abram (1996) argued that the human body is a "form destined for the world, . . . a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the compassing earth" (p. 62). Our experiences in themselves have a particular unfolding that represents this live energy. Our experience involves a dynamic process of contact, assimilation, and meaning making that can lead to personal growth and development (Gendlin, 1981). When this process of experience and meaning making is blocked, suffering occurs. This does not suggest that suffering should not exist; it does argue, however, that humans should be allowed the opportunity to suffer "through" life and should not be left at the doorstep of thwarted experience.

### *Rena: Language, Witness, and Ethics Arising*

My initial conversation with Rena was filled with a number of moments or events that challenged my understanding of ecological identity. True to her Cree heritage, Rena told the story of her own healing and how this healing transpired through a reciprocal relationship with the earth. In fact, Rena understood everything in her live in relational terms. As we talked, I became conscious of my desire to have her talk about her self and my assumption that if she used the word *I* it would mean that we were finally getting somewhere! Rena, however, did not use the word I to refer to herself, but she did use the words *we* and *us* often. In this regard Rena did not describe herself as a pipe carrier, but as a person who had received an honor from an elder. The gifts and skills that Rena possesses as a healer did not independently emerge on their own but were received from teachings from elders or other living entities. In an overall sense, the language that Rena used was always imbued with the experience of relationship, and not once did she describe herself in a way that separated her from the natural surroundings or the people with whom she worked. As a result of bumping up against this difference between Rena and me, I began to wonder in a more subtle way about the role of language in our descriptions of our experience in nature and our articulation of this meaning to others.

During this conversation Rena clearly described the role of animals in both her healing process and her personal life. Animals not only hold a distinct subjectivity that allows them to have an opinion about her behavior, but also have the potential to speak in ways that offer specific lessons that have been designed specifically for her. Rena referred to animals as members of a nation and suggested that they possess the capacity to "watch" humans and confer a moral judgment on what they do. When I used the word *witness* to describe this phenomenon, Rena wholeheartedly agreed with this term. The word witness came to me as I was talking with Rena; after our conversation I was compelled to understand this word more thoroughly and to understand the role of the "Other" in relation to my research topic of ecological identity.

Near the end of our conversation Rena spoke passionately about the importance of living in a way that is congruent with one's life experiences. She experiences herself as being in a profound relationship with the land and sees no difference between the idea of land and spirit. She described how her commitment to the Creator has revealed itself in the way that she acts in her day-to-day life and, more specifically, in how she treats others. How she relates to and treats others is a way of communicating this commitment, because once again she is being watched by others, and this has had a profound impact on how she is considered by her community. Rena also suggested that acting in a way that is congruent with her experiences in the natural world is also a form of modeling or teaching others. Rena dramatically described this form of practice as her religion or "way of life" that has emerged from her relationship with a world with which she is so intimately involved. This last part of our conversation made me think about my own life at both a personal and professional level and wonder where I garnered ethical guidance in my own relationships. It also made me think about my own experiences in the natural world and how I might consider these experiences as a source of ethical knowing.

In regard to language, Chawla (1991) suggested that our presuppositions about reality lie deep within our unconscious language habits. Similar to the hermeneutic tradition, Chawla argued that there is a direct correlation between the language we use and our worldview. She explained that our cognitive reality (how we perceive and create), shaped by language, is closely linked with how we understand what she called *object reality*. Object reality can refer to rivers, trees, plants, animals, and so forth. Chawla compared the language habits embedded in the English language with those of Amerindians and concluded that the unconscious habits manifested in the English language make it difficult to grasp the meaning of the human relationship with the natural world. Amerindian language, on the other hand, encompasses many characteristics that allow the speaker to comprehend and describe his or her experience in nature.

Chawla (1991) referred to a summary of an American philologist's research (Haas, 1978) that uncovers the specific differences between Amerindian and English languages. Amerindian language does not have a strong tendency to individualize mass nouns or measure intangible phenomena; it also makes a clear distinction between real and imaginary nouns. With regard to time, Amerindian language offers very little difference in tenses of verbs and treats time as fluid rather than a three-dimensional reality (p. 255). In an overall sense Amerindian language is embedded with assumptions that perceive the world as a dynamic setting built upon relationships that are highly reciprocal, have little separation between objects, and interact within a temporal space where the past and future have agency in the present moment. English language, on the other hand, is imbued with assumptions that separate objects, project linear causality in relationships, and compartmentalize time into three very distinct phases (past, present, and future). Thus, Chawla asserted that "English language habits are not very conducive to a holistic and careful attitude toward the natural environment" (p. 252)

Rena spoke to me in English, but I know that she understands and speaks the Cree language. In light of Chawla's (1991) comments, it appears that although Rena spoke to me in English, she was expressing some of the assumptions inherent the Amerindian language. As I have already pointed out, Rena preferred to use the words *we* and *us* rather than *I*; she always described herself in some form of relationship with the earth or animals or other people in her life. She referred to the people with whom she worked as participants rather than clients and to animals as siblings. Her relationship with animals is both intimate and reciprocal in character, and she explained how she can help animals as well as how animals can help her. Not only does Rena have this relationship with living entities, but she also has relationships with those in the spiritual world. Spirits take the form of people (elders) or animals, and she understands them as allies who have the capacity to relay a message meant directly for her. During our conversation Rena very seldom used language that divided time into artificial units such as the past or the future; her stories about the past, present, and future all seemed to exist in the present moment, and she very rarely linked her behavior to any past experience or any undetermined future consequence. In an overall sense we see how Rena's language in our conversations revealed a world view that is much more holistic in nature and sees her as a participant in a highly relational world. She might agree with cultural historians Dooling and Jordan-Smith (1989), who described Aboriginals' perceptions of themselves in the world as "I become part of it."

My conversation with Rena also helped me to understand the meaning of the word *witness* in more depth. This word came to me during our conversation when Rena was describing how animals seem to know when she is on her way to engage in a healing ceremony or when she is actually engaged in the activity itself, and when I suggested it, Rena enthusiastically agreed with its use. She emphatically stated that the animals *know* what she is doing, and she interprets the many animals that she sees on the highway on her way to a healing ritual as a sign that they support and celebrate her efforts to heal. The idea that these animals are always present (even if they could not be seen) and always watching had a dramatic impact on me.

The definition of *witness* and its etymological origins both have significance to this discussion. *Collins English Dictionary* (Sinclair, Wilkes, & Krebs, 1998) defined it as "a person who has seen something happen; evidence or testimony; *v* see at first hand; give evidence; sign (a document) to certify that it is genuine" (p. 472). At first glance the definition reveals an anthropocentric bias that only humans can be witnesses. Nevertheless, the definition allows us to expand Rena's comments if we consider the possibility that animals can be witnesses as well. When we see animals as witnesses, we understand their important role in not only Rena's own healing endeavors, but also her life as a whole. In my opinion, the notion of witness allows animals to play a role in "rooting" our behavior in our highly relational world. The etymological origin of *witness* is the words *knowledge* and *wisdom.* Rena indicated that animals may not think like humans, but they still play an important role in determining whether or not a particular behavior is appropriate. The wisdom of animals helps her to understand her relationship with them and the importance of considering how whatever she does will impact them. Her life choices are not made in an isolated vacuum, but in a living world that will be impacted by her behavior.

Evernden (1992) pondered the reason that humans have lost the capacity to consider animals as indeed observing us. He suggested that humans have treated other life forms generally as a research project, as objects of investigation, which leaves little room to encounter the Other in nature. Whereas we have drawn animals into the human world as pets and turned them into pseudo humans, we have done little to enter the world of nature. Evernden argued that actually encountering other living beings as Other requires that we loosen our conceptual bindings of nature to restore subjectivity (p. 108). Thus we must overcome deeply embedded notions of dualism and empirical investigations and stop treating nature "as an invading army treats an occupied country, mixing as little as possible with the habitants" (p. 109). The assumptions that underlie dualism prohibit contemplating nature as Other, because dualism removes all subjects from nature. If subjectivity and value rest only in the domain of humanity, the possibility of encountering nature as anything more than brute matter is nil. On the other hand, when we realize that there are things in the world that are not 'me,' that there is also Other, we are faced with the challenge of coming to grips with the significance of this discovery. Evernden described this realization as a shock because it leads to a form of radical astonishment. This realization has a dramatic impact: " If, in the narcissistic dawn of a person, there comes a realization that this center is not unique, the world reels" (p. 108).

It is from within her experiences in this highly relational world that Rena's sense of ethical knowing emerges. Contrary to the Western notion of an ethical code or standard of behavior that can be written "over" the world, Rena's understanding of how to live emerges from within her rich experiences in the natural world. This echoes Naess's (1989a) notion that ontology must precede ethics rather than the other way around. Naess argued that our ethical behavior must stem from our actual embodied experience in the world:

> I'm not much interested in ethics or morals. I am interested in how we experience the world . . . . Ethics follows from how we experience the world. If you experience the world so an so then you don't kill. If you articulate your experience then it can be a philosophy or religion. (p. 8)

Naess proposed that our experiences in nature cause us to act based on inclination rather than duty. Ethical action that arises from experiences that spur inclination, in Naess's view, is much more sustainable and leads to ways of living that are congruent with our place in the world.

Rena described her desire to live in a way that is congruent with her experiences as a religious endeavor. Throughout our conversation she did not engage in any discussion that represented any form of moral extensionism. In this regard she did not "grant" any moral value to animals or argue their intrinsic value on the grounds that they "deserved it." In fact, she made no reasoned argument based on any premise that justifies value as being bestowed upon an Other. Given her experience, acting in this manner would probably seem foreign, incongruent, and odd to Rena. Her experiences and the way she interprets them are filled with notions of inclusion, connection, similarity, and respect. Her view represents what Sessions (1981) referred to as *biocentric egalitarianism*: "Biocentric egalitarianism is essentially a rejection of human chauvinistic ethical theory and the criteria used to ascribe rights and value; it is a *reductio-ad-absurdum* of conventional ethics" (p. 5).

Conventional ethics that superimpose a way of acting upon the world is an example of the schism that exists between humans and the rest of the world. Zimmerman (1986) argued that moralizing in this fashion is ineffective and suggested that "before knowing what we ought to do, we must understand who we really are" (p.22). In a similar fashion, Evernden (1993) cautioned that "understanding ourselves is the first task of ethics, and the ethics we derive will depend on our understanding of Being" (p. 137). In a general sense these authors supported the notion that the search for morality lies not in the quest for moral principles as much as it does with experiential knowing. Livingston (1984) observed that ethics and morals are unknown in nature and are simply "prosthetic devices" (p. 61) that allow one species to meet the particular needs of that species. Rodman (1977) dramatically asserted, "The quest for an ethics is reduced to prattle about 'values' taken in abstraction from the 'facts' of experience; the notion of an ethics as an organic ethos, a way of life, remains lost to us" (p .96). Coles (1993) expressed a similar but perhaps more metaphoric sentiment: "Value is not some quantifiable fact but emerges like breath exhaled under water from an encounter between self and other" (p. 244).

### *Paula: Being, Emotion, and the Question of Self*

My conversation with Paula was both rewarding and challenging. I was intrigued by how our conversation progressed in a way that seemed to allow her to go deeper and deeper into her experience. At one time during our first conversation she admitted to being surprised about what she was sharing with me. Paula described her experience in nature as a stripping away of all of the expectations that society has placed upon her. She described this experience as "uncensored" and explained that, as she let go of who she was supposed to be, she was able to relax in a way that allowed her a more immediate and direct contact with the world. In Paula's words, this involved a process of "coming to her self." Even though Paula clearly stated that she had no desire to use language to describe this experience, I initially encouraged her do so. As our conversation progressed, however, she patiently pointed me in the direction of an experience that could not be captured by words. She spoke of an essence or a sense of being that came before words, which suggested that any language to describe it was a mere afterthought.

Paula described this experience as being filled with great joy and comfort and agreed with me when I suggested that her experience was like a "coming home" of sorts. She referred to it as a "bigger than experience" that provoked me once again to ask a question about what this meant, but she remained reluctant to attach any language to the experience. She reported, however, that her experience in nature has helped to eliminate the "chatter" from her social environment and to find an emotional and intuitive place from which she could live her life from the "inside out." Paula helped me to understand this experience by offering a number of clues. She told me that it is characterized by a sense of participation and relationship and that there is no clear boundary between her self and the outside world. Paula also described it in a very personal way and acknowledged that it challenges her sense of self, which has led to both positive (light) and negative (dark) feelings.

Near the end of our conversation and for some time afterwards, I became preoccupied with trying to come to terms with what Paula had shared with me. What was this emotional and intuitive experience that shook her sense of self to the core? She used the word *resonance* to describe this experience that revolved around an "essence" that had no clear boundary or separation from the natural world. Paula's emotions both support and validate this experience, and it is accompanied by feelings of great joy, comfort, and fear. This made me wonder about the role of emotions in this deeply personal experience, compared with the discourse on identity that seems so often to be constructed through intellect. In this regard, I realized that my intent to have Paula describe this experience was ill founded. The language I used revealed an attempt to confine or perhaps put "edges" around her experience as if it were an object that could be measured and described. I came to realize how my own attempts to understand were saturated with a Western discourse that privileged objectivity, reason, and autonomy.

Paula's description of her experience in nature is indeed provocative and in many ways resembles philosopher Martin Heidegger's (1962) articulation of the notion of "Being." Paula's experience does not reify an autonomous, separate self that is associated with any preferential subjectivity or attached ego. She described her experience in ontological terms as a seamless place in the world that escapes any attempt to explain it. Perhaps if she had been less patient, she might have responded to my questions by stating, "It just is."

Paula recounted an experience that was profoundly existential in nature, clearly felt, and immune from any language that could describe it. Her experience can best be described as an experience of "Being." Heidegger's (1962) ontological stance in respect to Being was essentially presubjective and prelogical. He was against any notion of an assumed and centered subject and argued that there was a defect in logic prior to the assumption of subjectivity. Being precedes subjectivity. Being represents a certain truth about the human place in the world and, if understood correctly, leads to a particular authenticity that involves letting go of the ego and fully realizing the privilege that humans are given in being able to listen to the voice and mystery of Being.

Humans, through consciousness, arbitrarily create notions of the self (as I did in the interview) that limit understanding. For Heidegger (1962) there was no distinction between human consciousness and the external world. In this regard there is no gap between the observer and what is observed. In Heidegger's view the world is not experienced through the observation of external phenomena, nor from the introspective investigation of the mind, but rather from a living participation in the world. Humans participate in the world with other beings, and our thoughts and feeling therefore stem from a collaborative affinity with the rest of creation. Paula's description of her experience in nature and Heidegger's conception of being open up the boundaries of the self and make it plausible, as Macy (1987) suggested, "to align our identity with the larger pattern, interexistent with all beings" (p. 20).

What becomes clear is that consciousness of the Self is not at the center of things, and therefore humans are not the assessors of the world, but privileged listeners to the voice of Being. The first act of listening to the voice of Being is to let things be so that they can reveal themselves in their own unique mode of Being. In this circumstance we become aware of the Being-ness of other beings and more in tune with the essential quality of our relationship with them. In many ways our self expands to encompass the other beings with whom we share the world. Evernden (1992) suggested that the boundaries associated with the self through experience are much different from visual boundaries. He argued that the self can expand beyond our skin-encapsulated bodies to include realms or spheres, or what he referred to as "fields of care" (p. 101). In this regard we come to understand the self in a much different light. Our awareness of the self expands to include others as we become more aware of the open and inclusive nature of being. This opens up the potential to identify with all life and, in Rodman's (1978) view, provides the opportunity to engage in an act of ecological resistance, "whereby one aligns the self with the ultimate order of things" (p. 54).

This form of intimacy with the world does not come without strong emotions, however. Paula described her experience in nature in emotional terms and shed tears over the personal nature of our conversation. She reported feelings of joy and comfort as she slowly settles into her self in nature and loses touch with all of the expectations that her social world places upon her. However, this experience has led to both "dark and light feelings." There seems to be a disparity between her experience in nature and the expectations of her job, family, and other social contacts. In nature she feels relatively safe in exploring the tentative nature of the boundaries of the self, but when she returns to the world of people, this ontological tentativeness is difficult to manage. This must be problematic for her, because she described her experience in nature as encompassing a more direct contact with reality and seemed antagonistic to what is expected of her in the "real" world. Paula acknowledged that this is a confusing experience, which is understandable for two reasons. There seems to be a schizoid character between what feels so right for her compared to what is expected of her. Furthermore, I wondered whether the joy and compassion she feels for others as a result of her experience in nature have been quashed by the demands of society for a more independent, autonomous (perhaps harsher) self.

Paula's personal comments suggest that her experience in nature is not only intellectual, but also emotional. In many respects her emotions support and hold her sense of self. Once again Heidegger (as cited in Levin, 1989) understood this and suggested, "Feeling is the very state . . . in which our being hovers" (p. 219). This is instructive in that it conveys the notion that feelings are an essential part of how we interpret our experience, and they are always present in whatever we do. Our emotions and feelings bring a tone to our experience. Fisher (2002) identified feelings as our bodily grasping of all that is nonfocal at the moment; they are our sensing, all at once, the many background meanings that are in play or relevant to us in any given situation (p. 57). Because Paula's experience was so wrapped in emotion, Heidegger's description of the role of emotions in our lives is easy to understand. It is our emotions to which we often turn when we try to describe an experience, and it is our emotions that provide such a fertile ground for understanding our being in the world.

Paula's experience is instructive in that her sense of self is put into question, which in turn influences how she relates to the world around her. Her experience erases the notion of a boundary between her self and the world and in turn helps her to understand the world in a deeply relational way. After our interview I realized that I was "caught in the act" of perpetuating a dichotomous subject-object view of the world that prevented Paula from sharing her experience and me from understanding it. I was particularly struck in the interview when she suggested her husband might have been able to answer my question better. This comment, along with the insight that the language was problematic, made me wonder about the role that gender played in our conversation.

Polk (1999) suggested that when we attempt to carve out a specific objectified and detached form of human identity (as I tended to do) from the rest of nature, the opportunity for oppression occurs. As Polk clearly pointed out, Western discourse does this by being saturated with a "disjunctive-value-hierarchical logic of the human/animal binary" (p. 13). More specifically, Western discourse reifies a separate (preferably White male) identity and bestows upon it more value than it does any other identity. In this circumstance all identities (other than the privileged White male identity) is seen as having lesser value. In Polk's view this split between humans and nature, women and men, and so forth is the root cause of the environmental and social struggles that we face today. Plumwood (1994) suggested that this alienation between men and women, between humans and other spheres of natural existence is supported by a dualistic power hierarchy that "creates a logic of interwoven oppression" (p. 211), Griffin (1989) echoed these sentiments: "We divide ourselves and all that we know along an invisible borderline between that we call Nature and what we believe is superior to Nature" (p. 8). These authors all argued that when an identity based on separation is created, hierarchical value ranking occurs, and the ontological circumstances for oppression become ripe. This ontological stance of a perceived value-based hierarchy of existence that presupposes an oppressive ranking structure is a view whose assumptions are deeply embedded in the Western discourse. This is evident in that it is very seldom questioned or thought of as a powerful social political ideology.

My conversation with Paula once again emphasized the important role of language in understanding the concept of ecological identity. It struck me at a very personal level that the language I was using was infused with a particular way of understanding my topic. In a metaphorical sense I was seeing through the "lens of language" in a way that influenced not only the way I asked questions, but also my understanding of what Paula was sharing with me. In an indirect way Paula was challenging my own sense of self, and this is what made the interview challenging for me. Paula described a highly relational sense of her self in nature, and I countered by trying to elicit a more exact, quantifiable description of this self. In retrospect, I may have engaged in this type of questioning because I was afraid of slipping into an existential-ontological space with which I was emotionally uncomfortable.

In light of this, perhaps Paula's husband and I may have had a good discussion about my research topic. However, I may have not been challenged in the way that my conversation with Paula challenged me. In a hermeneutic sense it was this point in our conversation on strangeness and difference pertaining to the conception of self that offered me the greatest potential for learning. I became fully implicated in the research endeavor in that I realized how my biases and prejudices impacted the way I interpreted my conversation and came to understand my research topic. At a more personal level, I began to think more about my own identity as a man and how my ontological understanding of identity impact the way that I relate to others around me. In an overall sense my conversation with Paula raised a question about the political dimension of my study. As Lease (1995) argued, when the notion of human identity comes into question, it always involves an attempt to understand reality in a particular way. This becomes a highly political endeavor, however, because when a certain ontological stance is favored to support a particular identity, certain identities become favored and others do not.

## Circles of Meaning

The events that transpired from my conversations with Donald, Paula, and Rena challenged me to reconsider many of my prejudices about my research topic. In an overall sense I was drawn into the hermeneutic circle by applying my newfound learning to the way that I had come to understand my topic. This was a destabilizing experience and provoked a desire to return to a more natural setting to help me to integrate this learning. Talking to people about their experiences in nature and writing about ecological identity while living in an urban setting had become difficult because my own experiences in nature had become distant and difficult to recollect. This is why I chose a wilderness setting to write the next section.

## White Rabbit Creek

I chose to write this section beside a beautiful mountain creek called White Rabbit Creek. This creek is located southeast of the Kootenay Plains, approximately 60 kilometers west of the town of Nordegg, Alberta. To get to this spot I have crossed a foot bridge over the North Saskatchewan River and hiked for approximately two hours in an easterly direction. I have set up camp and am now resting under a large cottonwood tree beside the rumbling waters of the creek. As I look out from this spot, I can see a large, peaceful meadow surrounded by poplar and spruce trees. A range of mountains provides a magnificent backdrop to this meadow as their dark blue (almost purple) color contrasts with the golden, shining grass of the meadow. I look out across the meadow and recollect the other times that I have visited this place. I have been visiting this special spot on a regular basis since 1979. I have come here with children with whom I have worked, with friends, and, most recently, with my wife and children. Each visit is unique; each visit offers something different. I am looking forward to my two days here.

After a good night's sleep I am having my morning coffee beside a fire. As I look across the meadow, it is not difficult to relate to the experience of awe that surfaced as a result of my conversation with Donald. The beauty of these surrounding has always had a deep impact on me. I sit overlooking the meadow just west of White rabbit creek and initially find it difficult to relax. I find myself thinking about my life in the city and am distracted from the beauty that surrounds me. Eventually, however, as I begin to focus on my breathing and become more relaxed, I am able to be more present. With each breath I feel as though I am taking in part of this beauty, and as I exhale I relinquish a part of myself to this beauty. Eventually it becomes difficult to track this experience intellectually because there seems to be no difference between what is outside of me and what is inside.

This experience reflects the ecological notion of a continuum of sameness between my internal experience and the outside world. It is from this experiential place of intimacy and relationship that my feelings of grief, anger, and sadness surface. Having this kind of experience opens me up to a certain vulnerability that reminds of my experience with the crow I befriended as a child. Feeling so deeply connected to a place or other being opens me up to the possibility of feeling the anguish of watching it being hurt or destroyed.

Donald described the beauty in an Alpine meadow as an original form of art. Keeping this in mind, I believe that any human activity that would alter this scene could be considered an act of violence. It could be compared to a knife slashing a beautiful painting, the canvas, the very fabric of the world, altered forever. Because my experience suggests that I am part of this earthly fabric, any violation of it would also mean a violation against me. Similar to my experience of the death of my pet crow, the destruction of this land and the loss of its original form could also be described as losing a part of my self.

Considering this violation and the potential emotional pain it might cause me, I initially feel that I should protect myself. I could do this by retreating into some form of intellectualizing that helps me to deny my experience. Donald described this as disassociation, which involves a distancing or tuning out of my bodily felt experience. This implies that I have a choice in how I choose to live my life in this meadow. I can choose to live as a detached observer who assumes that these surroundings have no meaning, or I can live as a participant in these surrounding and acknowledge that the life around me can make a claim upon me. Out here amongst the trees, the sounds of the creek, and the deep blue sky, it seems incongruent to me that I would make a choice that would separate me from this context. However, perhaps in the city amid the noise, distractions, and expectations placed upon me, it might be easier to make this choice.

After a brief exploration along the creek, I return to my campsite for lunch. While walking back to the campsite I hear the motorboat sound of a ruffed grouse flapping its wings. Over the years I have had a number of exciting encounters with animals in this area. Once while making my way through the bush to White Rabbit Creek, I stumbled upon a moose. On another occasion in an area close to where I saw the moose I saw a pine martin (whose numbers are rapidly declining in these parts) scamper across the forest floor to a nearby tree. On my first visit to this area, while hiking with a group of teens, I saw a grizzly bear foraging on a nearby slope. In thinking about Rena's relationship with animals in her life, it never occurred to me that perhaps the moose was watching me. I was struck with the idea that not only was I the observer, but I was also being observed. Within this type of awareness the moose assumes a subjectivity that I originally had not considered. In thinking about the pine martin, I wondered whether its presence might be understood as a request to "tread softly," or perhaps, by revealing itself to me, the pine martin was making a plea for help.

Sighting the grizzly was perhaps the most exciting encounter with an Other in this area. Initially when I encountered the grizzly, a surge of fear pulsed through me, and I immediately urged my hiking group to leave the trail. In retrospect, my initial fear revolved around the idea that the bear might harm me or one of my group. In a dramatic appeal, Hatley (2004) urged humans to consider the actual experience of being eaten by a bear. He suggested that our fear of the bear and being eaten by a bear represents our own fear of losing our grasp on the autonomous self and that if we allow ourselves to dwell on the notion of being devoured by a bear, we come to the realization through this process that we are becoming part of something much greater that sustains not only the bear, but also ourselves.

Rena suggested that as her relationship with the land deepened, her understanding of how to live in the world also deepened. As I experience this area in a deeper way, I can understand what she is saying to me. I am more aware that when I visit this area I am being watched by a multitude of living entities. If Rena's notion of witness applies to larger animals, why would it not apply to the birds, bugs, and even smaller creatures that inhabit this area? The feeling of being watched raises the idea that not only am I accountable for my behavior, but at some time I will also have to answer questions about why I acted the way I did. This is not to suggest that I am being watched "over" by an ominous presence that will punish me for my behavior, but rather that when animals witness my behavior, it represents the deeply reciprocal relationship that I have with them.

After lunch I decide to go for a walk in the forest to the north of my campsite. As I quietly walk through this area filled with lodgepole pine, I am struck by an immense silence. Within the dark shadows of the trees and the mossy forest floor, this silence pervades everything. In an odd and contradictory way, however, this silence does have a sound. My imagination conjures up the sound of an Australian Aboriginal musical instrument called the *didgeridoo*. What I hear in this silence resembles the sounds that this instrument makes. It has a low-pitched sound that seldom changes but seems to enter my body and vibrate in my bones. I wonder whether the sound of the didgeridoo is meant to represent the synthesis between the spirit and the land to which Rena referred. What strikes me at this point is that this energy or spirit does not differentiate and moves through me as much as it does through the space in which I am walking.

After my walk through the lodgepole stand behind my campsite, I make my way back to a nearby meadow. The meadow is fairly large, approximately the size of a football field, but it has the peculiarity of having one poplar tree standing right in the middle of it. I make my way to the tree, sit down, and enjoy the shade it offers. From this point I can see the entire meadow. As time goes by I find myself imagining that I am looking down upon myself sitting in the meadow. This has an impact on me, because from this perspective I realize that I am part of a larger picture and that my thoughts and feelings about this meadow have little consequence. I am just here in the meadow. The fact that this is true suggests that the meadow and my presence in it preexisted before any of my attempts to explain it. This is similar to the experience that Paula was trying to describe to me. There is a sense of being that is beyond words and perhaps requires a certain amount of imagination to acknowledge it. I am reminded of a wonderful passage in a book entitled *Gilead* written by Marilynne Robinson (2005), which is the story of a dying father writing to his son. In regard to the truth of being and the relationship to language, this character stated:

> We participate in Being without remainder. No breath, no thought, no wart or whisker, is not as sunk in Being as it could be. And yet no one can say what Being is. If you describe what a thought or whisker have in common, and a typhoon and a rise in the stock market, excluding "existence," which merely restates the fact that they have a place on our list of known and nameable things (and which would yield in insight: being equals existence!), you would have a accomplished a wonderful thing, still too partial in an finite degree to have any meaning, however. (p. 178)

This character affirmed that we are participants in Being but do not have the capacity to explain it. Being cannot be defined as existence because our existence is limited by the language we use, which leaves us with the experience of being but never having the capacity to explain it. Sitting in this meadow raises the question, How can all of this be? But my only answer might be similar to what Paula's might have been: "It just is."

It is the evening now, and I am slowly getting ready to pack for my departure tomorrow. As I sit beside the fire and reflect upon my visit, a number of thoughts and emotions surface. Being on my own has allowed me to experience this area in a more intimate way. I would not describe this experience as an experience of attachment. It feels more like an experience of spiritual and emotional resonance. As I prepare to leave White

Rabbit Creek, I feel as though I am taking part of it with me and at the same time leaving a part of myself behind. This brings feelings of sadness, but also a sense of great joy over having the opportunity to experience it. As I discovered from my interview with Paula, my experience in this area has been held and supported by a wide variety of emotions. In the past two days I have experienced awe, grief, joy, wonder, sadness, and humility; it occurs to me that I have experienced a lifetime of emotions over these past two days. This is what strikes me the most about my visit, and a question surfaces: Is the "call of nature" actually an invitation to experience life in a deeper and more meaningful way?

As I am driving home I reflect upon my visit to White Rabbit Creek and begin to think about how I will write the next section of chapter 5. In an overall sense I am thankful for the opportunity to reflect upon my conversations with Paula, Rena, and Donald. My two-day visit to White Rabbit has helped to confirm and deepen my learning. From my conversations with Paula I have learned that I must be open to changing the way that I think and talk about the concept of self. Up to this point my understanding of the notion of self has been very narrow and has limited any explanation of what it means to have an ecological identity. From my conversations with Rena I have also learned that ecological identity can never be understood in isolation and must encompass a highly reciprocal and interdependent relationship with others. Rena has helped me to understand the role that our experiences in nature can play in forming moral and ethical behavior. Furthermore, my conversations with Donald helped me to widen my understanding of the role that experience plays in our lives and to consider not only the interpretive processes that follow experience, but also, just as important, the quality and scope of these experiences.

My conversations with these research participants and my visit to White Rabbit Creek have also raised a number of questions related to my research topic, and I will identify and explore these questions to help me to reconceptualize (compared to the initial conceptualization that I offered at the end of chapter 2) my research topic.

## Reconceptualizing Ecological Identity

> Hermeneutic work requires me to begin elsewhere. I begin, not as some fantasized place of clarity and distinctness and methodological security, but begin, rather, having already begun: in the midst of the roil of everyday events, everyday experience, in the midst of the life I lived, in the midst of what has come of me after all these years. (Jardine, 2000, p. 106)

My journey to understand the concept of ecological identity started a long time ago. As for Paula, nature has represented a touchstone for me in many different ways throughout my life. When I was a young boy, the woods behind my house offered a place of adventure and, similar to Donald's experience, emotional safety. As I grew older my experience in nature taught me about love, relationship, and connection to others. It also taught me about the emotional pain that can be associated with this type of deep connection. Even at an early stage in my live I relied upon my experiences in nature to help me navigate the challenges in my everyday life.

As a young man I found that my experiences in nature raised a number of questions about who I was and what my purpose in life was. At approximately the same time I began to share my experiences in nature with troubled teens and discovered that the outdoors could be an excellent place to enhance personal healing. Later in my professional life I continued this therapeutic work with men and used a wilderness setting to help them to enhance their relationships with themselves, other men, and their significant other. Although I currently do not engage in therapeutic work in the outdoors, I still consider it an important resource for my own personal healing and growth. I continue to visit areas like White Rabbit Creek with friends, and certainly the experience of sharing outdoor activities with my wife and children is one of the most joyful and satisfying activities in my life.

Considering my personal experiences and my role as a social work educator, it is not a surprise that I would want to study the concept of ecological identity. Since the 1970s the theoretical foundation of the social work perspective has been an ecological perspective. Recently, however, as we have seen in the first three chapters, social work scholars are beginning to point out that, despite social work's ecological perspective, nature is still treated as a benign backdrop to the suffering and injustice that takes place in our world today. In this regard, studying ecological identity is timely in that it offers the potential to reengage with nature in a manner that might help social workers to address the persistent social and environmental problems that we face today.

What strikes me the most about this study of ecological identity is that, although I am hoping to make a contribution to the profession of social work, engaging in this activity has been a very personal experience. Studying the literature on ecological identity; engaging in conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula; and then interpreting these interviews have had a deep and unsettling impact on me. The literature on ecological identity has raised many valid questions about the salience of an ecological identity, and my conversations with my research participants have rendered a number of "events" that have changed and expanded the way that I think about this topic. My growing understanding of hermeneutics has also helped me to understand the role of history and tradition in how I have come to understand this topic. In an overall sense I feel that I stand in the midst of an array of events, experiences, and understandings that indeed call for more interpretation, but also for a momentary "taking stock" of how I make sense of my research topic at this particular time. Hermeneutically speaking, understanding never occurs without a context, and as a result the very foundations of the words that I use in this next section will tremble under the weight of the historical and cultural place in which I wrote them. This does not suggest that I should not have taken the risk of writing a conceptual understanding of ecological identity. It does, however, posit that this conceptualization will represent another dynamic starting point for an understanding that will require further interpretation and conversation.

A hermeneutic account of the concept of ecological identity should reflect the questions that have surfaced as a result of the discourse that has transpired in this study. In this context I have identified five questions that need to be explored to allow a conceptualization of ecological identity in a way that will provide a comprehensive view of the concept and will instigate further conversation and interpretation:

1. In understanding ecological identity, what is the role of experience, and what can be said about the relationship between experience and language?
2. What are the origins of an ecological identity?
3. What are the conditions necessary for an individual to respond to the invitation of Nature?
4. What type of experience causes a person to claim an ecological identity?
5. What does a claim of ecological identity entail?

## Experience, Language, and Meaning

The emerging discourse on and interest in ecological identity is in large part a reaction to a general yet pervasive crisis of identity that is emerging in the Western world stemming from the profound separation that has transpired between humans and the natural world. The modern view of the world based on excessive rationalization and intellectualization has left us aliens (Evernden, 1993) or strangers in our own homes. This profound sense of alienation leads us to an almost compulsive and frantic quest to answer the question, "Who am I?" To answer this question, or, perhaps more appropriately, to cope with emotions associated with this question, we have focused our efforts on reifying the self and refortifying the conceptual walls that have divided us from the nonhuman world. Despite these efforts, we still find ourselves grasping at "existential straws," unable to address the serious social and ecological problems that we face today.

Our inability to relate to the natural world in a meaningful way can be described as a type of autism (Abram, 1996) in which our ability to communicate with the life around us has been muted. Our experience is limited because we can engage the world only through the narrow channels of intellect and reason. Fisher (2002) referred to this as a "transition gap in the continuity of our existence" (p. 98). Swimme (1990) described this as a fragmentation of experience that essentially shuts down a person's fundamental cognitive, sentient, and sensorial powers. He aptly stated:

> We have only a sliver of our original minds still operative . . . . It is a sliver chiseled to perfection for controlling, for distancing, for calculating and for dominating . . . . Our insistence on analysis, consumption, on categorization has blinded us to the reality of the whole. We have been seated at a table heavy with food, and instead of realization that this is a feast we are meant to join, we occupy our minds with counting the silverware over and over as we starve to death. (p. 16)

Overcoming the constraints that divorce us from the natural world requires that we revive our experience in a way that allows us to gain unity with all life. We can do this by refraining from depending entirely on the confines of our head (Lease, 1995), or, as Fisher suggested, by "waking on our head" (p. 54) and trusting our bodily, sensed encounter with the world. This, in Fisher's view, will lead to a more authentic understanding of our place in the world and help us to navigate the challenges associated with life.

The origins of an ecological identity begin with our experience, which is prime in that it is our first contact with the world before any language is attached to it. It involves the lived space or contact point between our bodies and the rest of the world. In this regard ecological identity requires a trust in the body as the essential ground of our knowing. Moving from a highly autonomous sense of self towards a more relational understanding of self requires that we surrender to our experience. As we allow ourselves to do this, we are brought back into the world, and the process of renewal and reconnecting with the earth begins.

If experience is understood in this way, then any language to describe it always comes too late. As we have seen, any attempt to describe experience through language is imbued with the values and moral standards inherent in the culture and tradition from which it is spoken. Our experience in nature can never be captured by the language that we speak because it is saturated with its own biases and prejudices and, as a result, limits the way that we can talk about experience. In a hermeneutic sense, one way to address this problem is to engage in conversation with others so that we can be taught by what confronts us as strange or out of the ordinary. This was clearly evident in my conversations with Paula and Rena. I learned that the language that I used with Paula represented a particular understanding of identity that is different from hers. I also learned from listening to Rena that there are indeed different ways to use language that more closely represent our relationship with nature.

Because of the very characteristics inherent in language, however, we can never say that the language we use to explain a particular phenomenon represents any form of steadfast truth. The primacy of experience and the secondary nature of the language to describe this experience imply that, when I am referring to ecological identity, I am making a linguistic *claim* about what an embodied experience in nature means. The etymological root of the word *claim* comes from the words *cry*, *call*, or *appeal* (Hoad, 1996). With this in mind, the word claim connotes an inherent tentativeness that is associated with any attempt to define identity.

The gap between language and experience, however, must be understood in a more dynamic way. We have seen through Donald's, Paula's, and Rena's experiences that meaning surfaces at the contact point where body and world meet. Meaning does not magically materialize as a result of an independent mind that determines reality; rather, it emerges from within a dynamic embodied relationship with the world. It would be erroneous to think of language as a form of free-floating symbols that surface from nowhere and are connected to nothing.

Fisher (2002, p. 129) argued that, despite language's interpretability, it still emerges from "within" the world and is an expression of it. Even though language is rooted in history, tradition, and culture and is highly contingent, it must be acknowledged that it also originates from experience. French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1964) held that the body is "predestined to model itself on the natural aspects of the world. But an active body of gestures, of expression, and finally of language, it turns back on the world to signify it" (p. 7). This perspective sees language as a gesture that draws its meaning from our contact with the world. In this regard Fisher stressed that it is important to consider the relationship between the phenomenal world and language as two open systems. In his view, language certainly impacts experience, but experience also impacts language:

> Language, on the one hand, and the phenomenal world, on the other, form two open systems which mirror and feed one another; . . . the world knows itself as it is reflected in language and language knows itself only as it is reflected in the actual world. (p. 128)

## Responding to Nature's Invitation

One of my most enjoyable outdoor activities is canoeing in the geographical area known as the Canadian Shield. This large area begins in northern Quebec and stretches across northern Ontario, Manitoba, and part of Alberta. It is a paddler's paradise because it is filled with an infinitude of interconnected lakes. Canoeing on these lakes is a continued process of discovery and rediscovery. While paddling on a lake on the shield, I always look towards the horizon to find the entryway to the next lake; I am always on the lookout for a clearing in the bush that might reveal the start of a portage or a dip in the contour of land that might transform into a passageway to the next lake. Sometimes my observations are wrong or my map reading is incorrect, and I misjudge one of these "signs" as an entry point and have to turn around and continue my search. At other times I am more fortunate and find a way to the next lake, only to discover the horizon of the far shoreline beckoning.

The postmodern view and its critical stance on language make it difficult to consider the autonomy of nature. As Evernden (1992) has clearly revealed, the meaning of the word *nature* has changed dramatically over time and in the process has been manipulated to serve a number of different purposes. He described the organic web of life that surrounds earth as the "great amorphous mass of otherness that encloaks the planet" (p. 109). Evernden argued that our beliefs and values concerning the way of the world have infused nature to the point that we have created a pseudo nature. This is so deeply embedded in our thinking that our interpretations of nature seem natural, but, in Evernden's view, it is still not a direct report of it. He contended that we have conceptually separated ourselves from nature by our own construction of it, and as a result "we are no longer in nature conceptually; purpose is no longer intermingled with the birds and the stars" (p. 30).

However, within the postmodern critique of language is the danger of a tendency to relativize Evernden's (1992) "amorphousness mass of otherness" (p. 109) to the point of abstraction and nonexistence. Heyd (2005) argued that this perspective is inherently anthropocentric in that it suggests that meaning exists only in language, that nature is autonomous because it can be understood as a self-regulating system, and that it has a particular integrity and *telos* or end of its own. Katz (1997) saw nature as an autonomous entity because it must be seen "as an ongoing subject of a history, a life process, a developmental system" (p. xvi). With regard to the human meaning-making endeavor, Soper (1995) suggested that

> there is essential agreement that nature has value independently of human purposes or perceptions, that this has to do with its autonomy of those purposes, and that this provides compelling reason why humans beings should revere it and as far as possible leave it be. (p. 252)

The postmodern emphasis on language as a social construction has disenfranchised nature of the possibility of being an autonomous other. Thus the first step to what Plumwood (2005) called "liberatory naturalism" (p. 25) involves reclamation of what has been lost in the postmodern discourse. Gadamer (1979) referred to this as allowing "what is alienated by the character of the written word or by the character of being distantiated by cultural or historical distance speak again" (p. 83). This describes an alienation that has taken place in which humans have withdrawn themselves from that which claims them, and this failure to respond has separated us from nature. To overcome this estrangement, we need to respond to the voice of nature and interpret it in a way that science cannot. In this light, we can overcome our alienation from nature only through a dialogical encounter with what is strange, alienated, and lost to us.

In the context of this research project, considering the autonomy of nature elicits the idea that an ecological identity emerges from a relationship with this lost *Other*. It also suggests that nature can be considered a teacher, friend, and ally. Donald and Paula believe very clearly that nature is their ally and has helped them to cope with the challenges that they encounter in their personal lives. Rena considers the animals in her life potential teachers with specific lessons designed especially for her. Donald dramatically affirmed that in many cases he prefers the company of nature to the company of his human acquaintances. All three research participants considered nature an "Other" and their relationship with nature as a source of emotional support and personal healing.

In my opinion, the way to address the postmodern critique that emphasizes the ultimate interpretability of language is to consider this amorphous mass of life (Evernden,

1992) an invitation. This nature is an invitation to engage in the hermeneutic endeavor. We can learn directly from autonomous nature, or we can see it as an invitation (or portal) to understand the larger sense of nature that encompasses the original Greek meaning of "everything" and has the potential to reveal what can be called "the nature of things." The wind that we feel against our skin, the butterfly that gently floats in the air before us, and the grizzly bear that feeds upon a deer carcass can all be understood as an invitation to further meaning. Approaching nature in this way is an endeavor that has been lost in the modern and postmodern discourse. Encountering nature as something new, strange, or alien that has the subjective potential to claim us is the first step to overcoming this loss. Interpreting nature is in essence a primordial effort and involves, as Smith (1999b) suggested, "thinking through the implication of facing what comes to meet us as new" (p. 47). Engaging nature as an invitation is also congruent with the hermeneutic endeavor because, as we have seen in my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula, it leads to ways that help us to understand ourselves and how we can lead our lives in more sustainable and meaningful ways.

My conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula reveal the conditions necessary to be able to respond to the voice of nature. In all three cases they engage in relationship with nature by themselves and in silence. When Donald was in a mountain meadow, he was by himself. Paula was also alone beside the creek close to her home. Rena described her relationship with the earth as an intensely personal and intimate affair, and she does a great deal of her personal work alone in the presence of nature. Not only are these individuals alone, but the role that language plays in the meaning-making process also becomes diminished. In fact, Paula reported that her implicit intention is not to put language to her experience, which is contrary to the Western propensity to emphasize the importance of language, and it reveals perhaps a prejudice that there is no meaning in silence or even a fear of silence. The way that Donald, Paula, and Rena described their experiences, however, suggests that being alone and living in the silence of nature offer a path to deeper understanding and awareness.

Nicholsen (2002) suggested that to engage in a meaningful relationship with nature, one must be able to respond to what she referred to as nature's "summons" (p. 20), which is represented in silence. To respond to silence, Nicholsen advised that we "learn silence" (p. 20) by giving up the habit of talking. In her view, if we are able to respond to the silence of nature, the potential is enormous: "The silence of nature is more than an absence of human language. It is an overarching sense of both containment and potential, of vitality ever emerging and not yet grasped" (p. 20). Responding to this summons, in Nicholsen's view, demands attention, which requires a shift from language to falling silent to a profound attention from which some Other can come to meet us. "In this state, we can be touched by the intense aliveness and presence of the natural world and its creatures, among which we are ourselves" (p. 20)

Fowles and Horvat (1979) argued that we can engage in what he called nature's consolation only when we are alone: " Nature can be known and entered only by each, and it is not by you, through me, by any you through any me; only by you through yourself, or me through myself" (p.). When we leave language behind, enter the silence of nature, and contact nature in this manner, our sense of our selves becomes challenged. Without the false security of language, the self is put into question. In the presence of nature without language, the boundaries between self and other become blurred, and our inner world and outer world meet. Shotter (1999) described this as living at the boundaries of being, and Nicholsen (2002) eloquently referred to it as "tangling at the roots of being" (p. 63). It is within the silence of nature that the boundaries between our selves and the world begin to dissipate and we come to realize that the self cannot confirm or represent the "world" because, in fact, the self is held and confirmed by the myriad of relationships that we call the world. It is in this depth, or what Nicholsen called the abyss of the nonhuman, that we discover that nature actually does have something to say.

Responding to nature's invitation can be a humbling experience as our egos dissolve and the sense of our self expands. Our identities become released from our skin-encapsulated bodies as we meet "somewhere in the middle" with other beings. In many ways our identity evolves, not from any cognitive predetermination, but from within a phenomenal field of relationships. Smith (1999b) suggested that it is not that there is no self or Other, but that this dualistic formulation puts the emphasis in the wrong place; and that when we imply the self, we are also including the Other. Trying to separate the two is a futile effort "because they are always everywhere co-emergent, with a denial of one being a denial of the other" (p. 18). In an ironic way this implies that we must lose our selves to find ourselves. Smith described this as the great relinquishment of the self to the ocean of wisdom, where there is no time for self and other to be differentiated. In this regard we find our selves transformed into an unfolding drama in which all things, all people, regardless of race, gender, or class, participate (p. 24).

## Origins of an Ecological Identity

The origins of an ecological identity are initially revealed in the way we interpret our childhood experiences. Although it may be difficult to determine a genetically predisposed ability to engage nature in a way that helps us to understand ourselves, there is ample evidence to suggest that children have the capacity to engage nature in a way that helps them to form identity. Children are able to relate to other nonhuman entities in a myriad of ways that foster identity formation. As we have seen in chapter 2, children are able to empathize with other beings (trees, for example) to the point that they can assume a tree's perspective. Children also demonstrate the capacity to hold a biocentric view of the world by ascribing moral value to the natural world around them. More important, and perhaps what relates most to the potential of forming an ecological identity, children demonstrate the capacity to understand themselves as being in a symbiotic relationship with other beings. In the presence of nature, Evernden (1992) suggested that children learn that "rather than Descartes: I think, therefore I am, the inarticulate child—who may not think at all in the philosophic sense—discovers that because there is other, because there is 'not me,' the other reveals itself" (p. 112).

In my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula, they all at one time or another referred to their childhood experiences in nature. Donald talked about the emotional safety that he felt in the bushes close to his childhood home. Rena reported a time (not on tape) when she was struck by the beauty of a butterfly sitting on the sidewalk on her way to school. Paula articulated that making snow angels helped her to feel like a child again, which brought back positive feelings. What stuck me about these accounts is that in all three of these scenarios the research participants were by themselves. It also strikes me that within these childhood experiences, time seemed to stand still. This suggests that an encounter with the Other in childhood requires a certain aloneness in which the child is free of society's restraints and expectations, which Paula referred to as "chatter." In all three situations chronological time also dissipated into *kairotic* time, in which the fullness of the moment brings the child face to face with the Other.

Drawing upon the work of Swiss philosopher Jean Gesper (1985), Chawla (2002) linked the childhood experience in nature with identity development. She highlighted Gesper's notion that many forms of consciousness can be brought to experience. Gesper referred to the archaic or magical consciousness that children use to interpret their experience in nature. This experience is preverbal, occurs in silence, and leads to a lack of differentiation between the child and the outside world. Within archaic consciousness, time and form meld, and language is thrown to the wayside. In Chawla's opinion, these early childhood experiences have a profound impact on formation identity in later life and, in a hermeneutic sense, allow for the ecological prejudices that instruct the way that we interpret ourselves as ecological beings in later life. In this regard our experiences are half received from early experience and half interpreted from the current circumstance.

It is important to note that these early childhood experiences are not considered less sophisticated or of less value than adult experiences. In fact, there is often a strong comparison between the characteristics of adult and child experience that includes a radical contact with the Other, a deep sense of emotional resonance with this Other, and a dissolution of the sense of an autonomous self. It seems that our childhood experience in nature is not a development task per se as much as it is a familiar touchstone that helps to reify and acknowledge the adult experience in nature. This is instructive in that it offers a place from which adults and children can engage in an encounter that calls for a genuine and equal dialogue.

In retrospect, it is no surprise that the research participants shared stories about their early experiences in nature. Their childhood experiences held a particular wisdom that helped to determine the content and tone of our conversations. This resonates with me at a personal level as well. While I was engaged in this research endeavor, I often revisited my own childhood experiences in nature, which I used to help me to articulate my thoughts and ideas and, in part, to guide my research. For example, the emotions of joy, grief, and love that I associate with ecological identity are all emotions that I experienced in nature as child. In many respects my childhood experiences (and the early experiences of my research participants) contributed to my ability to talk about the concept of ecological identity. Evernden (1992) suggested that childhood experiences in nature provide the conditions for us to consider ourselves as ecological beings in later life. The potential to understand our selves as having an ecological identity is awakened by our early experiences of self in the world. Without these early childhood experiences, our capacity to talk about ecological identity would be severely limited.

Although early childhood experiences in nature are important in the development of an ecological identity, Shepard (1996a) added that it is also important that humans have the opportunity to engage nature in all stages of the human development process. Tomashow (2003) revealed the important role that nature can play in adolescent development, and Shepard argued that it also plays an important role in our adult lives. Shepard criticized modern psychology and its reluctance to include the role of nature (in particular, animals) in our psychological development. Shepard posited that psychological and emotional maturity requires an analogy of the self in the world that acknowledges a dynamic process of ever-widening contact with the world. This process of bonding with and differentiation from the Other is well know in psychology, but is very rarely emphasized in our relationship with the natural world. Expanding our scope of possible sources of meaning from not only the social realm, but also other living entities helps us to identify with deeper life processes and to develop a more dynamic sense of ourselves in the world. We begin to understand ourselves as participants in a highly relational world and challenge ourselves to reconsider the way that we live our lives. Shepard described this initial process as the first step towards emotional and psychological maturity.

Identity theft has grown to become a major concern for many of us in our lives. The loss of credit cards, drivers' licenses, and electronic sources of personal information leaves us vulnerable. However, this seems superficial compared to the form of identity theft that occurs as a result of the loss of a natural habitat and destruction of the natural environment. When we destroy nature, we limit our capacity to create meaning in our lives. Kahn (2002) suggested that when children do not have the opportunity to engage nature in a meaningful way, they develop "environmental generation amnesia" (p. xi). This means that we forget how to engage nature, carry this disability forward in our own lives, and perhaps pass it on to future generations. Louv (2005) called this disability "nature deficit disorder" (p. 98) and highlighted his concern by pointing out that many children recognize and are more emotionally attached to computerized icons than to the plants and animals in their own backyard. When we destroy the natural environment, not only do we run the risk of harming ourselves in a physical sense, but we also rob ourselves of an essential source of existential meaning. When children are denied the opportunity to learn from nature, their capacity in later life to assume an ecological identity is jeopardized. It is difficult to determine the impact that this form of identity theft will have on our lives. When credit cards and other representations (paper or electronic) of our identity are stolen, it makes it difficult to live our daily lives. It is not difficult to suggest that when our capacity to develop an ecological identity is stolen from us, the problems that we face will be deeper and more complex and have a longer lasting impact.

## The Experience of Ecological Identity

A closer look at the experiences that lead one to claim an ecological identity reveals an attempt to overcome the alienation and separation that have come to characterize the human-nature relationship. In many ways a claim of ecological identity represents an attempt to overcome the deep schism that has transpired between humans and their natural environment. Within the claim of an ecological identity is an underlying process that runs a course from loss and alienation to reclamation and healing. This reclamation involves bringing the human meaning-making endeavor back into relationship with the rest of the world. To reconsider ourselves as deeply relational beings, Fisher (2002) suggested that we have no other options but to rely upon our experience: "To study the human-nature relationship is to pursue the essence of experience itself, while, conversely, to revivify our experience is to find nature at its heart" (p. 55).

The notion of revivifying our experience in nature is an important element in our consideration of the concept of ecological identity. The term *revive* suggests that humans need to bring the breath of live back into the human experience. The literature on ecological identity has made a strong argument that the modern propensity to favor human intellectual and cognitive capacity has limited our ability to experience the world. Objectivity and reason have not only guided our scientific endeavors, but also become the primary *modus operandi* for how we experience the world. In many ways we enter the world leading with our heads while leaving our bodies behind. Our capacity to feel, sense, intuit, and kinesthetically experience the world is lost to the skepticism of reason, which makes it difficult to trust our selves. In a dramatic sense the bodily experiences inherent in our contact with the world have been denied a voice and therefore limit our ability to relate to the world and create meaning in our lives.

My conversations with Rena, Paula, and Donald reveal a multitude of embodied experiences that helped them to claim an ecological identity. These experiences are all highly relational in character in that they demonstrate a deep and meaningful contact with a variety of "Others." Within these relationship lie deep emotions of awe, joy, wonder, grief, pain, loss, and vulnerability. These relationships are negotiated in a kinesthetic sense because the participants move within a realm that acknowledges both the similarities to and differences from the "Other." Their experiences are also very sensual in that the skin, eyes, nose, and ears all act as receptive devices that seem to draw in the world, which creates a form of intimacy between the individual and the world that, in turn, challenges the sense of self. In this regard it appears that the self dissolves or is perhaps lost, only to reappear in an essentially relational co-dependent form. Although the experiences of my research participants in nature were different, they all tended to use these experiences in a way that helped them to establish their identity as human beings.

From my conversations with the research participants and my own personal experiences, it is evident that an encounter with nature as Other takes on many different forms. Within the context of silence, and prior to the social chatter that predetermines how we think and feel about things, lies experience. While walking near White Rabbit Creek, I was startled when I came across a moose in the woods. Our eyes met, and I was struck with the idea that the moose had been watching me well before I had even noticed it. This surprise encounter made me wonder what the moose might be seeing, and this was humbling because I realized that I had always lived by the assumption that only *I* had the power to see and determine the world, but here was this moose, challenging this assumption. Evernden (1992) described this experience of the Other as encompassing the realization that "isn't it amazing that there is that, and not just me?" (p. 112).

The Otherness of nature can take on many different forms. Donald became enamored with a patch of lichen that held the beauty of an original piece of art. This beauty is original in its character because, in his view, not only is it more beautiful than whatever humans have created, but it has also escaped the touch and impact of human industry. Donald admires this beauty from a distance, is careful not to trample on it. I imagine him walking around this piece of the meadow in a state of awe, trying to behold the beauty in front of him. Here is something of great beauty, great value, and worthy of special attention and consideration. Buried within this lies the question, How can something so beautiful exist? And perhaps more directly is a sense of amazement that this exists at all.

These forms of encounter that recognize the otherness of nature are, in Evernden's (1992) view, sensual as much as perceptual. For example, rather than merely seeing with the eyes, one sees *through* the eyes in a way that elicits an entire bodily response. Within the immediacy of this contact, the Other is not intellectualized or cognitized, but still exerts an impact through the nature of its very existence. Evernden argued that this is not an unconscious event, but rather a preconscious event, because "consciousness cannot grasp firmly while intentionality is at risk" (p. 114). In many respects this represents a poetic event more than anything else because it encompasses the superficiality of the event (meeting the moose, looking at the lichen), but provokes contemplation of the profound (who am I in relation to this?). Therefore an encounter with nature as Other becomes a source of deep awareness, or what Evernden described as "radical empiricism" (p. 114). In this deeply felt, somatic experience, a new source of valuing and ethical know-how emerges.

From the experience of encountering nature as Other, our relationship with the world begins to bud. How one interprets this relationship varies, but it is evident from Donald's, Rena's, and Paula's descriptions that their relationship with the natural world is filled with emotion and meaning. Donald referred to the other beings with which he shares the world as kin, and he sees himself as a member of a community. He articulately described how this relationship must be treated with respect and fidelity. He also argued that his relationship with nature is one that has progressed and evolved over time, and he was critical of any notion that suggests that this relationship does not need to be given special consideration or attention.

Rena's relationship with nature intensifies when, in her vision-quest ritual, she denies herself food and water. As her hunger and thirst increase, she engages in a highly reciprocal relationship with the earth. She offers her self and her sense of identity to

"Mother Earth" in exchange for strength and courage. In addition, she sees herself as a member of the two-legged nation amongst other nations who are present to her pain and suffering. Paula's experience beside the creek close to her house reveals an intensely intimate relationship in which she experiences her self melding with or dissolving into a mysterious, unexplainable other. For all three participants, this relationship blossoms from the metaphorical nutrients of silence, trust in the bodily experience, and willingness to abandon any preconceived notions of an autonomous self.

While I listened to Donald, Paula, and Rena, it was difficult not to be affected by their stories. Similarly to Donald, I have been taken aback and found myself in awe of the beauty of an Alpine meadow. Rena's healing relationship with the earth also resonates with me because I have had similar experiences of feeling supported and nurtured by nature during personally difficult times in my life. Paula's experiences also seemed familiar to me because I too have experienced my day-to-day sense of self and being challenged to the very core because of an experience in nature. In the context of my conversations with these people, however, I was struck by the emotions that surfaced. I was deeply impacted by Donald's tears and the deep grief that he expressed. In retrospect, I realize that Donald's grief was a catalyst that spurred me to acknowledge my own grief about the destruction of the natural environment. Fisher (2002) suggested that it is not only grief that we experience as a result of the perilous destruction of the environment, but also shame that emerges from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. Nicholsen (2002) pointed out that when we dare to have an emotional relationship with nature, we become vulnerable to the joy as well as the pain inherent in this relationship given its modern context. The shame to which Fisher referred is evident in Donald's words that in many cases he much prefers the company of the animals and the forest to that of human beings. I do not believe that this reflects a misanthropic statement as much as a comment about the grief of being associated with a species that unrelentingly destroys life in all of its forms and manifestations.

Responding to nature's invitation leads us to engage in a relationship that is filled with emotion. In many ways, responding to the invitation of nature represents an initial response to the call of life. We are given the opportunity to experience these emotions in their fullness, and in doing so, we enter the world on its terms rather than our own. Rather than our cognitive abilities, emotions become our guide to our place in the world. Drawing upon the philosophy of Benedict Spinoza, Damasio (2003) discussed the important role that emotion plays in our lives. Spinoza was critical of the human tendency toward dualism and argued that the world is, in fact, one substance and that the relationship between humans and the rest of the world can be understood as a continuum rather than two separate phenomena. In Spinoza's view, there is no difference between a person's psychic and emotional experience and the rest of the world. In this regard a person's emotional experience of joy and sorrow is an accurate representation of the quality of his or her environment. Our emotions are not irrational and are understood as a continuum between our inner lives and the world around us. According to Spinoza, our felt experiences of the world play a key role in the survival of the human species. Damasio demonstrated that Spinoza's work is supported by modern-day neurobiology and emphasized the idea that our emotions play an a priori role in influencing our thinking. In this context the emotions that Donald, Rena, and Paula shared with me must be taken seriously because they provide concrete evidence that there is something askew in our world. This also suggests that emotions play an essential role in identity formation because they hold us *in* the world, compared to our cognitive capacity, through which we determine the world from afar.

Inherent in the formation of an ecological identity is the experience associated with identification. Fox (1990) argued that the process of identification is deeply embedded in the human psychological makeup. Fox pointed out, however, that the word *identification* is problematic in that it suggests that identifying with nature depends on the notion of sameness. Although this is partly true, Fox suggested that identification also involves the important experience of commonality and that when we identify with a tree, we may experience some similarities, but this does not mean that we are the tree. He emphasized that identifying with an Other being allows our experienced self to expand to include that Other, but that differentiation between the self and that Other always exists. Differentiation does not mean that we are separate from the other because, through our experience, we also come to realize our commonality with the other. Fisher (2002) described this experience of *kinship* as moving along a continuum that encompasses the human's capacity for both separation and fusion: "Scattered between these two end points denotes the experience of unity-with-separation, likeness-within-difference, continuity-within-discontinuity or identity within differentiation" (p. 95).

My conversations with Donald, Paula, and Rena reveal the role of identification in the development of their ecological identity. Paula's experience in nature reflects a form of *ontological identification* when she experiences her self as moving beyond her encapsulated body out into the world. She experiences her self as part of something greater than what she normally associates with. In a unique form of *personal* *identification*, Rena identifies with the animals in her life. They bring a message of wisdom from the spirit world that has a specific meaning for her. The animals with which she communicates help her to expand her sense of self because they hold a piece of wisdom that lies beyond her normal day-to-day understanding. These animals also seem to draw her into a larger community in which she identifies herself as a member. In the latter part of my interview with Donald, he revealed a form of cosmological identification when he talked about his sense of self in relation to his death as a "fleeting bit of matter" that will become a part of a larger ocean of life. All three participants saw their sense of self challenged in a way that made them consider an expanded sense of self. In addition, they find themselves part of a greater life process of unfolding. Herein lies the experience of commonality that Fox (1990) identified, and Fisher (2002) suggested that at the heart of an ecological identity is a more fundamental identification with the process of life itself.

Fox (1990) contended that the self can be expanded to encompass the totality of a person's identifications. This expanded self, however, raises other conceptual challenges. As he pointed out, an expanded self that includes others brings us to a "difficult ridge to walk: To the left we have the ocean of organic and mystic views, to the right the abyss of atomic individualism" (p. 232). I believe that this perspective perpetuates a subject-object discourse that seems to suggest that a person must choose one side of this conceptual ridge over the other and that a more dynamic perspective would be to consider self and nonself as a simultaneous event. Poet Robert Bly (1980) described this as a relationship of twofold consciousness in which we simultaneously experience a particular merging with nature and separateness. If we can imagine a shoreline on a beach of a lake or the ocean, we see this relationship occurring. As a wave approaches the shoreline, it is difficult to determine where the wave ends and where the shoreline begins. The wave rhythmically reaches for the shore, sometimes further, sometimes not as far as others. Eventually, the wave diminishes and the water soaks into the sand. The shoreline then becomes an interplay of sand and water. At one time there is sand, and at another time there is water; both transform into the shoreline. At the confluence between the self and the nonself, an ecological identity emerges.

In [illegible] overall sense the dynamic array of experiences that cause a person to claim an ecological identity find us moving back and forth between what Evernden (1992) called the "radical astonishment" (p. 111) of the other and the similarity we feel with other living entities. Winnicot (1971) described the space between similarities and differences with other beings as a "third space" (p. 101) and suggested that this space provides us with an opportunity to play as we move back and forth between these realms. He also argued that when we stop playing and become stagnant in this third space, we quickly lose the capacity to develop a vital orientation to the world. In my opinion this third space can also be considered a space of the *commons* because, metaphorically and logistically, all entities on this planet share this space.

Donald, Rena, and Paula move within this terrain freely and seem open and willing to engage in whatever they encounter. Their ability to describe their experiences comes from a unique way of understanding the world. All three individuals experience the world in a highly sensual, kinesthetic, emotional, and intuitive way. Morito (2002) averred that to understand our selves as "in the world," we must move from a place of cognitive knowing to one of embodied awareness. He referred to this embodied awareness as a state of ***attunement***. When we become attuned to the world, we let go of the myth that concepts and logic are sufficient to help us understand it. Attunement involves opening ourselves to the full range of our capacities to engage the world. In Morito's view, when we experience the world through our embodied selves, we become attuned to the very pulse of nature:

> When attuned to the world in this way, intellect, feeling and emotion are all directed toward attending to the gestalt of the plurality of factors that we cannot identify one by one. The world is seen and understood in a way that is entirely different from the way in which it seen by the theoretically directed vision of the laboratory or library. This is not to dismiss the laboratory or library modes of understanding; it is to acknowledge that they are limited and reductive ways of understanding. They do not provide access to the pulse of the land or the experiential whole of having to attune ourselves to the land. (p. 181)

In this regard the limitation of our traditional understanding of knowledge becomes apparent because it always speaks "about" the world as an object. Morito's notion of attunement, however, speaks of another way of understanding the world. It suggests that the traditional way of thinking about the world is insufficient and needs to be balanced with an embodied awareness of our being *in* the world or, as Besthorn (1997) preferred, *with* the world.

Although Nicholsen (2002) does not use the word attunement, she does, in my opinion, accurately describe the process of attunement. She referred to African bushmen's unique experience of the world. They leave behind their cognitive understanding and rely upon their kinesthetic and sensual experience instead, which makes it easy for them to move between their own internal experiences and the outside world. This type of dynamic interplay reveals their enmeshment in the world and creates the awareness that there is little difference between sensing and what is sensed. From this place of attunement the bushmen understand that they cannot know everything or predict what will happen to them. They live in a realm of uncertainty that helps them to be open and alert to the world because they know that they will never be able to fully comprehend it. They also know that sooner or later they will be called upon to feed the "body" of the world because they experience themselves as part of it. This describes the process of attunement in a very graphic way. The bushmen are fully present to their surroundings, which Nicholsen characterized as follows: "The mind open to the emergence and evolution of psychic reality both cherishes and confirms that reality and is nourished by eating it" (p. 75)

## The Claim of an Ecological Identity (A Personal Reflection)

At the beginning of chapter 1 of this research project I described an experience on the Canadian Shield that had a significant impact upon me. This experience, along with several other similar experiences in nature (some of which I reported in chapter 3), led to my choice of social work as a profession. My conversations with Donald, Paula, and Rita helped me to interpret these experiences in a different way. Donald talked about human beings as "finely tuned instruments" with the capacity to experience the world in the fullest sense. Paula suggested that understanding our place in the world requires that we let go of the day-to-day understanding of our selves to be able to explore more deeply our relationship with the rest of the world. Rita explained how our behavior has been guided by her understanding of this relationship and has a bearing on how she treats others. In retrospect, my experiences in nature and my choices lead to the question, "What is my ecological identity?"

A wide variety of experiences that have led to my claim of an ecological identity surfaced at a very early stage in my life and have continued throughout my life. My early experiences in nature were a touchstone in that they helped me to articulate my experiences as I grew older and in many ways guided the questions that I have posed with regard to an ecological identity. Although my experiences in nature have been varied, they have a number of common characteristics, no matter when and where they took place. These experiences were intensely personal in that they revealed a direct and reciprocal relationship between myself and my surroundings, and they often took place when I was alone, accompanied only by a deep and penetrating silence. As a result of this silence, my experiences in nature were essentially embodied experiences that transpired well before my desire to put words to them.

Abram (1996) described bodily senses as a portal or gate that allows the outside world to impact an internal experience: “We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human . . . . The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils—all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of otherness” (p. xi). In my experience, this contact with the Other involves a highly dynamic process in which I have moved between not only the differences, but also the similarities that I have felt. This dynamic process suggests that I experience in a kinesthetic sense a particular “being in the world.” Nicholsen (2002) identified this experience by comparing the differences between travelers and tourists. Traveler roam the world with an open mind, moving back and forth between similarities and differences, always alert and ready for a radical encounter with the other, which helps them to learn about the other as well as themselves. Tourists, on the other hand, admire the world from afar and break it up into moments of superficial contact that rarely holds any significant meaning.

My experiences in nature have also been accompanied by a myriad of emotions. When I was a child, my experiences were filled with emotions of wonder, awe, disgust, and love. As I grew into adolescence, my experiences in nature revolved around adventure, and in this context I learned about my physical and emotional limits. Now, as an adult, I experience many of these emotions and have discovered that the emotion of grief has become more prevalent for me. My grief in part revolves around the staggering needless loss of life in all of its forms. However, it also originates from my own experience of feeling that I have lost and am trying to recapture a part of myself. Grief accompanies my attempts to establish an ecological identity because I am now aware that forming an ecological identity involves what Fisher (2002) referred to as a process of recovery (p. 52). Establishing an ecological identity entails reconciling the schism or divide that has occurred between humans and the organic world. The search for an ecological identity entails a process of healing by overcoming our alienation from the rest of the world. Fisher suggested that the grief and emotions that result from loss and alienation will guide us in ours attempts to identify ourselves as ecological beings.

Ecological identity surfaces as a result of the way that I interpret my experiences in nature. The path towards an ecological identity is formed initially by the way that I come to understand the world. I claim an ecological identity when I allow birds, animals, trees, and the landscape to make a claim upon me. I have come to understand the organic web of life that surrounds the earth as an invitation to which I must respond with an open mind and open heart. This involves a process of letting go of my desire to ultimately know the world in a cognitive sense. It also involves trusting my bodily felt experience and having the courage to face the challenges that this type of experience offers. I have to let go of my preconceived notions of my self for my ecological identity to emerge.

Therefore, responding to nature as an invitation and claiming an ecological identity, initially at least, represents a psychological death of the self. The fear of death in general in our society is perhaps the biggest obstacle to sustaining an ecological identity. In many ways the modern era has been a testament to and complete affirmation of the autonomous self. We have reified our selves to the point that we go to all costs to deny their tentative and finite status. The claim of an ecological identity encompasses the notion that we are part of a greater "stream of life" or unfolding that originated well before us and will continue well after us as well. Schwaller de Lubicz (1963) referred to nature as a verb that represents a process or action of which we are not only part, but always enacting. Claiming an ecological identity acknowledges the reality that we will die. More important, it reveals a willingness to live with the uncomfortable questions that emerge rather than to ignore or deny them by grasping an identity that claims security in a particular answer to this dilemma.

Within the silence of nature, my sense of self dissolves and I am left with the prelinguistic, embodied experience of what Nicholsen (2002) described as "tangling at the roots of being" (p. 63)—being "tangled," so to speak, at the edge of the void . . . the source from which all life comes. In a traditional sense an ecological identity can be considered a homeless identity with no locus related to geography, culture, or occupation. However, Nicholsen argued that

> from the perspective of the ten thousand things emerging from the void, home and homelessness become identical in the sense that everyplace has the same origin and every place is a possible place to recognize the common ground in the void. (p. 108)

In Nicholsen's view, an ecological identity emerges when we are at home in the universe by being open and present to the entire whole. The capacity to be present to the whole by resisting the temptation to carve up the world in forms of traditional identities is a sign of maturity. "The notion of homelessness, then, extends the notion of being at home to the larger cosmic connections between earth and soul that arise through what we might call not only perceptual but also imaginal maturation" (p. 108).

Being at home "to the larger cosmic connections between earth and soul" raises the question of agency. Heidegger (1962) suggested that when we act or behave in a way that does not acknowledge our deeply relational experience with the rest of the world, we are acting in an inauthentic manner. Rita very clearly explained how her relationship with animals helps to determine her behavior. Donald depicted his relationship with the more-than-human world as a marriage that requires a high degree of commitment and devotion. My experiences in nature and the way that I interpret them cause me to act in three distinct ways. It is no surprise that the word *humility* originates from the word "groundedness" (L. *humus*). In my engagement with others I must be humble because my ecological identity is built upon the idea that I share a common origin and destiny with them. I must also be respectful, not because of any self-benefit, but just because the other does in fact exist independently of anything that I might think or say. Finally, I must practice compassion because my ecological identity claims a deep and interdependent self that exists only in relation to the myriad of others in the world. In this regard needless suffering can be considered to have a ripple effect that impacts all life on this planet, including myself.

As I learn more about my own ecological identity, a question about what I can legitimately say about it arises. Speaking about ecological identity is an impossible task because the language used to describe it always comes late. Language follows experience, which supports Evernden's (1992) claim that nature is "ultra human" (p. 116), which means that the world is beyond the grasp of language, and despite our best attempt to construct nature, we will never be able to accomplish the task. I believe that this does not mean that I should not speak about ecological identity. As Lease (1995) suggested, humans are meaning-making beings, and stopping this process would stop life itself. The words that I speak originate from my bodily experiences in the world. Speaking of ecological identity is something that I can share with others. Within this dialogue we can once again pay special attention to the language that I use to describe my experience. This is essential in determining the "language games" that are at play in my own and others' personal stories. We will never be able to fathom nature, but we can at least live and talk in a way that will allow meaning and, accordingly, life to go on.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge in claiming an ecological identity is overcoming the tendency towards the dualism that has been so much a part of Western European history. In my view, the tendency to separate humans from nature is still deeply entrenched in the ecological-identity discourse. This discourse remains a subject-object discourse, with very little capacity to come to grips with the life that lies in between these polarities. However, my experience reveals that, although an ecological identity may be formed and nurtured outside an urban environment, it would be incorrect to suggest that an ecological identity cannot be "grown" and sustained in an urban environment. Beneath the sidewalks, roads, and buildings that we construct in our urban environment, the soil that sustains our life still exists. We see evidence of this when we see a dandelion peering through the cracks of broken concrete. This dandelion is an invitation for us to consider that life is in our midst. In this regard the joy, grief, and awe that have been part of my experience in the world outside the city also surface in my day-to-day life. The birth of my children and the emotions that I felt were similar to the wonder, joy, and awe that I felt when I sat by myself in the meadow along White Rabbit Creek. In my work as a social worker, the grief and sorrow that I feel in working with people who have been systemically disenfranchised and disempowered are similar to the emotions that I feel when I ponder the destruction of the rainforest. In an overall sense, my claim of an ecological identity involves an attempt to overcome the artificial separation that I have created between myself and the rest of the world by emphasizing the importance of identifying with life in all of its forms. Macy and Brown (1998) identified this as coming back to life itself.

My own experience suggests that in my day-to-day life my ecological identity takes on a hidden character. I was raised in a White working-class family, and a particular story of success was deeply instilled in me. I was taught that success means moving up the employment ladder, making more money, and gaining more status. As my life progressed, my identity became more and more closely linked with these aspirations. When I finally had the opportunity to work in a job where I had "made it," I soon found myself disillusioned and disappointed. Whereas my job offered social status and financial reward, the work itself felt empty and meaningless. I quickly realized that the identity that I had created for myself was one that had been prescribed and one that I erroneously believed represented the "real" me. After having undertaken this research, I now realize that my ecological identity lies hidden somewhere below this hollow social identity. In my attempt to claim my ecological identity, I have become more aware of the values that I want to embrace in my own life as a father, husband, and social work educator.

In summary an ecological identity emerges within an historical context that includes both a cultural and an organic past. In many ways humans can be viewed as a form of living history because their bodies not only contain the origins of the universe, but also represent the culmination of a deep and reciprocal relationship that has transpired between them and the rest of world. Determining an ecological identity is an attempt to reclaim the capacity to understand ourselves through our embodied experiences in the natural world. When we begin to trust these experiences, our narrow, preconceived notion of the self becomes challenged. As our autonomous, ego-determined, skin-encapsulated self diminishes, the world opens up to us in a different way. We begin to understand ourselves as part of a larger, more dynamic process. Fisher (2002) suggested that at the core of an ecological identity is identification with life itself. When we identify with life, we become attuned in a way that allows us to be present to the fullness of the world. More important, we are given the opportunity to experience ourselves as held by the world. In this place, the place where we are held, we find our home and, correspondingly, our ecological identity.

While visiting White Rabbit Creek, I observed an eddy along the shoreline and reflected upon the similarities between the eddy and the meaning of having an ecological identity. Compared to the stream, the water in the eddy appeared to be calm, and it was easy to see the waterlines that demarcated the eddy. However, underneath the eddy I knew that the water was in motion because it was stirring up the debris from the creek bed just below it. Eventually, the movement of the stream and the water underneath the eddy forced the surface water of the eddy back into the mainstream. Once part of the mainstream, the eddy disappeared and became part of the larger current moving downstream.

Perhaps the stream can be understood as the dynamic life force that has unfolded on this planet since the beginning of time. The eddy represents the momentary and illusive formation of our identity that not only is sustained by this life force, but eventually succumbs to it as well. The underlying movement of the water represents the ever-constant dynamic of change that is inherent in our daily lives at both an organic and an experiential level. The rock and soil and other fecund matter that shape the eddy (and are influenced by the stream as well) represent the natural landscape in our lives that has the capacity to shape who we are. In an overall sense, our ecological identity can be found in every part of this dynamic portrayal of the eddy and the stream. The stream of life, the dynamic process inherent in our lives, and the landscape surrounding us all play a role in forming our ecological identity.

In the next chapter I will continue to integrate my learning about my ecological identity into my professional life as a social work educator. I will start this chapter with a brief summary of the way that the social problems and the ecological dimension in our lives overlap. I will then review some of the rich learning that I have gained as a result of my attempt to understand ecological identity and discuss how this learning can be applied to the practice of social work. Subsequently, I will return to my second conversations with Donald, Rita, and Paula and interpret the conversations in a way that will focus upon the times when I was challenged or surprised and began to think differently about social work practice. Following this interpretive section, I will explore the implications of my research for how I teach social work. I will conclude this final chapter with a brief review of the process of conducting this study and an overview of the personal and professional learning that stands out for me.

# CHAPTER 6:

# BACK TO LIFE

> Love means to look at yourself
> The way one looks at distant things
> For you are one thing among many.
> And whoever sees that way helps his heart,
> Without knowing it, from various ills—
> A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.
>
> Then he wants to use himself and things
> So they stand in the glow of ripeness.
> It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves:
> Who serves best doesn't always understand. (Milosz, 1988, p. 50)

## Identity Adventure

A foray into the creek beds that run through our cities or the wilderness areas located outside our urban landscape can lead to an identity adventure of significant proportions. I am struck by how their respective experiences in a boreal forest, alpine meadow, or northern tundra challenged my research participants to think differently about themselves. The seeds of an ecological identity came to life when Donald, Rena, and Paula encountered nature in a way that allowed the organic and sentient life around them to make a claim upon who they are. This was the first step of an adventure that was filled with emotions of awe, grief, fear, humility, and appreciation. In addition, like all great adventures, these experiences led Donald, Rena, and Paula to reconsider how they should act in both their professional and their personal lives.

As I begin chapter 6, the question of application surfaces for me as well. My conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula have not only challenged the way I thought about the concept of ecological identity, but also shaken my understanding about what it means to be a social worker. During my second conversation with my research participants I constantly encountered different ways to think about the notion of social work practice that in turn made me reconsider the way in which I approach my role of social work educator. In an overall sense the meaning associated with ecological identity complicates many of the concepts traditionally associated with the practice of social work. The social work relationship, social work ethics, social justice, and various fields of social work practice (e.g., working with children and families, mental health) can all be seen differently through the lens of meaning associated with an ecological identity.

To facilitate an exploration of how my newfound understanding related to ecological identity impacts social work practice, I will initially highlight some of the ideas and concepts that already exist within the discourse of this study that are instructive to the question of application. To set a context for this chapter, I will briefly identify the challenges associated with linking social and environmental problems. I will then return to my second conversation with Donald, Rena, and Paula and explore in an interpretive way what it means to practice social work from an ecological identity perspective. Following this section I will explore the ecopedagogical implications of my newfound understanding. I will conclude this chapter and dissertation with a brief overview of my learning and consideration of a "new" question that I hope will keep the conversation alive with regard to what it means to have an ecological identity.

## Experience, Identity, and Agency

As we have seen in chapter 5, an ecological identity emerges from our direct experience in nature. This experience is essentially a sensuous experience in which our sense of sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste engage the world in a deeply relational way. As Abram (1996) suggested, the world comes *in* to us through our senses, and we move *out* to the world through our senses. This reciprocal relationship between our embodied selves and the world around us challenges us to determine where our selves actually begin and end. As we extend out into the world, we find ourselves moving back and forth between a "radical astonishment" (Evernden, 1992, p. 111) of the other and a sense of sameness with other life forms. This dynamic experience is embodied in a way that allows us to kinesthetically understand space as a "commons" that we share with all sentient beings. In this regard we become "attuned" to our surroundings in a way that is represented in a deep physical, emotional, and spiritual affinity with life in all its forms.

The claim that comes from an ecological identity experience contrasts with the identity claims associated with other more traditional identities. The claims associated with an ecological identity dispute the notion of an autonomous and separate self and promote the notion of the self as a phenomenological field that exists only in deep reciprocity with the rest of the world. In this regard the earth is considered the ground of all of our experience and the source of all of our meaning-making endeavors. As Abram (1996) pointed out, our direct experience of the more-than-human world not only proceeds, but also sustains all human theorizing. As I found in my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula, their experiences in the world of lichen, animals, and meandering creeks have compelled them to care deeply about other sentient beings. They have also used these experiences to guide their work as social work practitioners.

An exploration of ecological identity reveals that it is an impossible task to separate the concepts of identity and agency. Clayton and Opotow (2003) argued that each of these ideas must be seen as a continuous and perhaps circular process in which each affects the other. Our identity as an ecological being may enhance our ability to act in an ecological sustainable way, but so too can acting in an ecological sustainable manner enhance our ecological identity. In addition, like all organisms and organic structures, we adapt and change as a result of our interaction with the environment. In the context of an ecological identity, there is no separation between experience-identity-agency; all are essentially a part of a dynamic process akin to every sentient being on earth.

Clayton and Opotow (2003) suggested that agency related to ecological identity needs to be seen in the social context in which people live. They explained the experiences that lead to an ecological identity in gestalt terms by describing how our direct experience in nature may provide the most immediate source of identity formation, but, in addition, our social context plays an important role in determining how we interpret these experiences and act upon them. My interest in exploring how the concept of ecological identity applies to the practice and teaching of social work reflects this point. So do the stories of Donald, Rena, and Paula. We join a growing number of social work educators, academics, and practitioners who want to bring social work back into the world by acknowledging our complete and utterly interdependent relationship with the more-than-human world. This will be the focus for the rest of this chapter.

## Limited Discourse

In many ways this dissertation reflects an attempt to reclaim a particular lost dialogue. Prigogine (1986) suggested that humans must reclaim an *experiential* dialogue with the world rather than the *experimental* dialogue that has evolved and taken precedence in our times. As a result of my conversations with the research participants, it has become clear to me that their direct embodied experience of the world of creek beds, tundra, and mountain alpine meadows have provided a rich source of meaning. In addition, Donald, Rena, and Paula were able to interpret their experience in ways that helped them to understand themselves in a deeper way. Amongst the roots of grass below their feet, the birds that flew over their heads, or the wind that touched their cheeks, these research participants also found great humility and compassion for all sentient beings.

The rich experiences of my research participants raise questions about the quality of our life experiences, especially as they relate to our current cultural circumstances. Fisher (2002) argued that direct embodied contact with the natural world has become restricted because of the limited way we engage the world. In his view we relate to the world only as producers or consumers. When we are given the opportunity to engage the world in a deeper, perhaps more embodied way, we struggle because, in Fisher's opinion, humans have lost the capacity to trust the wisdom of their own experience. As we have seen in chapter 5, to address this "experiential starvation" (p. 172), humans must overcome the cultural proclivities that lead us to focus on the future rather than the present, favor speaking over silence, and reify reason over our bodily felt experience.

We have already seen how Donald, Rena, and Paula were able to interpret their experiences in a way that helped them to understand themselves as deeply relational beings. Donald's, Rena's, and Paula's experiences and the way that they interpreted these experiences were very unique. In my opinion, their interpretations did not match the general norm of how we come to understand ourselves and our place in the world. The modern discourse related to the environmental "crisis" reflects a very narrow understanding of the problems we are facing. It also says a great deal about the identity of the speakers who are engaged in this discourse. Unlike Donald, Rena, and Paula, the general discourse related to our environmental problems reflects an identity that is separated from the rest of the world, relies heavily on technology and science to solve problems, but is unable to make a link between environmental degradation and human behavior.

Discourse related to this problematic identity is abundant. For example, Caldwell (1999) suggested that when we refer to problems of *the* environment, it implies that these problems lie somewhere "out there" like some distant object with no affinity with human order. He argued that, in fact, the problems we are facing are not environmental problems but, rather, human problems or, more specifically, problems related to how humans have chosen to organize themselves. Caldwell was also critical of the use of the word *crisis* to describe our ecological woes. In his view crisis is imbued with the connotation that if we just bide our time and continue to rely upon technology, we will eventually make it through these difficult times. In a similar light, he wondered whether Rachael Carson's (1960) book *Silent Spring* (which is often referred to as the catalyst for the modern environmental movement) set us off in the wrong direction because it defined environmental degradation as a problem of science.

Finally, Caldwell was skeptical of the phrase *our common future*, which is often used as an argument to rally people against the destruction of the environment. He argued that this phrase is a myth because, in general, those who suffer from environmental pollution both in the present and in the future will be those who are poor or are from marginalized groups. There is no common future because the rich and privileged of this world will have the capacity to cope (initially, at least) with the consequences of environmental pollution.

What is most important about Caldwell's critique is that it demonstrates how modern discourse on the ecological challenges we face today is built upon prejudices and biases that limit our capacity to address these challenges. This discourse reveals how we consider our selves separate from the more-than-human world and approach ecological problems in the same way that a doctor treats a sick patient. The problem with this scenario, however, is that it precludes the idea that, in fact, the doctor might be implicated in the cause of the patient's sickness. This is analogous to the way that modern discourse has separated our social and ecological troubles. In this regard, Fisher (2002) argued that we are not facing an ecological crisis nor a social crisis, but a "social ecological crisis" (p. 21).

It is my opinion that the social work profession has an important role to play in addressing the social ecological crisis. Social work has always been a profession that stresses the importance of the interplay between humans and their social/political context. Social work has also been underpinned by ecological principles to help understand the relationship between humans and the various systems in their lives. As we have seen, however, social work has also been challenged to widen its perspective by reconsidering our relationship with the more-than-human world. This is certainly a daunting challenge, but as we have seen throughout this dissertation, there are ways that this can be done.

## Early Evidence

Throughout my first conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula, I was constantly challenged to reconsider what I now understand as my narrow and static preconceived notions of social work practice. The literature related to ecological identity was also filled with moments of "surprise" that pointed not only to the underlying dynamics of social problems, but also to what might be done to ameliorate them. A brief account of the interpretive moments in both my first interviews and the literature that challenged my notions of practice will help to reveal the place in which I have entered this particular hermeneutic circle. It will also help to set the direction for how I interpreted the second set of interviews with Donald, Rena, and Paula.

As I have already mentioned, an ecological identity in part entails a claim that puts into question the notion of an autonomized and individuated self. Fox (1991) articulately described the tendencies and related perils associated with an individuated, skin-encapsulated self. He suggested that a self cut off from the rest of the world leads to behavior that is generally impulsive in behavior, tends to make decisions that meets its own needs over others, and tends to demand conformance to a certain code of conduct. Fox went further by suggesting that the narrow, preconceived sense of self can lead only to action that is limited because it maintains and preserves the status quo. On the other hand, Fox pointed out how a wider and perhaps deeper sense of self can lead to choices that are more inclusive in character and more sensitive to the needs of others.

I see evidence of the proclivities of an expanded sense of self in my first conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula. As I have already shared in chapter 5, Donald compared the human body to an instrument capable of a deep resonation with all that existed. It is at this point of contact between the body and the world that experience emerges and is sustained. Fisher (2002) argued that it is precisely at this point that the trauma of abuse and neglect is found. Abuse and neglect, amongst other forms of violence, impact our capacity to experience the world. In this regard, Fisher described how, when children are abused, their very "nature" is impacted because it disassociates them from the world. This affirms Donald's comment at the end of my first conversation with him that a great deal of his work revolves around the process of disassociation and the goal of helping people to reassociate with themselves and the world around them.

Rena's view of the world has emerged from her experience of living on the land, and her relationship to the land became an important source for her moral behavior. Rena's sense of self is molded by her biocentric view of the world that encompasses the notion that all "others" have intrinsic value. Rena does not extend this value to others, but it emerges in the context of the simple fact that she shares the world with them. She manifests this view in the vision of a circle of beings, all with equal value. Whereas she was clear about her facilitator role, she did not exclude herself from the group work, nor did she hide behind any notion of being the expert. T[illegible] boundaries between Rena and the group were less differentiated and more obscure tha[illegible] been taught are needed as a therapist. Rena understood herself as a participant, an[illegible] women in the group, played an important role in witnessing the pain and suffering that were unfolding.

Paula described very clearly the dissipation of herself out into the larger world. She described a self with no egoistic boundaries that exists only in relation to everything else. In regard to social work, this raises the question, "What is my relationship to the suffering of others?" In my opinion, a wider, more expansive self that exists only in relation suggests that I am somehow both affected by and implicated in the suffering of others. I become not only impacted by the suffering of others, but also compelled to respond to that suffering. Evernden (1985) described this self as an experienced field of care, and in a similar vein Simmons (1993) converted Descartes' adage of "I think; therefore I am" into "I am; therefore I care" (p. 80).

Evernden's (1992) focus on nature as a social construction also has implications for social work practice. He explored the changing meaning of the word *nature* over time and revealed that the original meaning of nature meant "everything," but that it eventually evolved into what Evernden described as a nature-as-container phenomenon. He then articulately described how the "container of nature" becomes both the repository and the target for the deepest fears and anxieties of the human race. We have all heard about marginalized groups being either included or excluded from this socially constructed container of nature. For example, we have heard the statement that homosexuality is "not natural"; as a result, humans who participate in this lifestyle become excluded from nature and become marginalized members of society.

Polk (1999) suggested that the way that society views and understands nature is in large part determined by those who are associated with a heterosexual, White, male identity. It is this identity, Polk argued, that assumes the privileged position of speaking on behalf of nature. He pointed out that the language associated with what is "natural" revolves around concepts of competition, domination, and exploitation. It is this type of language, he contended, that subjugates and marginalizes any group who might think differently. Polk called for a more diverse and inclusive language that comprises notions of reciprocity, interdependence, and diversity and concluded that changing the root metaphor of our Western discourse is the first important step in addressing the oppression of all others in the world today.

In summary, the first five chapters of this dissertation provided me with an excellent starting point from which to interpret my second conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula. I have learned how deeply ingrained the schism between humans and the nonhuman world has become in our society. This has severely limited our capacity to address the serious social and ecological problems we face today. I have also learned, however, that when we allow ourselves to experience what Heyd (2005) described as autonomous nature, our identity as ecological beings emerges. An ecological identity grows from an understanding that we are participants in a world that we can never fully explain. We do know, however, by virtue of our experience, that we are part of this great unfolding and need to live accordingly. In my first conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula, they offered seeds of wisdom that no doubt helped me in my attempt to interpret my second conversations with them.

## From the Ground Up

My second conversations with each of my research participants were far ranging and, because of their unique practice setting, quite different from one another. In this section I will once again focus upon the events in these conversations that challenged me to think about practice in a different way. To develop a relatively cohesive (but not necessarily exhaustive) account of what I would describe as "ecological social work practice," I will also point out some of the themes that emerged as a result of my conversations and give specific examples that show that my research participants were at times saying similar things. Finally, because this section is an interpretive account, I have written in a compelling manner in that I make a claim upon my reader in a way that reenacts the full, embodied drama of what it means to help someone from the standpoint of an ecological identity.

### *The Presence of an Ecological Identity*

> No guru, no method, no teacher
> Just you and I . . . in the garden. (Morrison, 1998)

Donald, Rena, and Paula clearly described how their experiences in the organic world serve as an important source in understanding themselves as helpers. Their embodied experiences complicate the notion of an autonomous or "fortressed" (Welwood, 1983, p. 47) self and lead them to an understanding of a "self in conviviality" (Abram, 1996, p. ix ) with all others. From this highly relational, completely dialectical sense of self emerges an attitude of "unclosed indebtedness" (Jardine, 1998, p. 91). Donald, Rena, and Paula have discovered that the human endeavor, whatever form it takes, is dependent upon the very ground upon which it occurs. We exist because everything else exists. In many ways this opens the helping process up to the rest of the world because it prevents us from narrowing the notion of helping to a lifeless interchange between two autonomous objects. The earth under our feet, the sky above us, and the air we breathe all have a say in what it means to suffer and, subsequently, what it means to heal.

In this context it is no surprise to discover that we can find this deeply dynamic and widely contextual perspective embedded in the language that Paula and Rena used to describe their work. Rena suggested that when she experiences the world in this deeply relational way, she is able to live more in tune with the rest of creation. This experience allows her relational self to emerge, which in turn helps her to become more in tune with the people with whom she works. Paula cautioned that when we allow ourselves to be seduced by the world of "Gucci watches and designer clothes," our role as helpers can easily become a façade. She explained that she tries to bring her authentic self to her work, which leads to vulnerability because, similarly to Rena, she does not draw clear, distinct boundaries between herself and the people with whom she works. Paula described this relational openness as bringing her heart to her work. It is this organic, life-enhancing symbol of love that Paula and Rena offer the people with whom they work.

In my second conversation with Donald I was struck by the way that he compared how he engages clients with a walk in an alpine meadow. He described himself as a visitor waiting for an invitation to delve more deeply into what presents itself. I was struck by the word *visitor* and discovered that the etymological roots of this word, in part, refer to "come to, in order to comfort, or benefit; go to persons in sickness, etc., to comfort them" (Onions, 1996, p. 528). Donald "comes to" the suffering of his client, but his role is not to intrude, but simply to be present and, in his words, "notice" what is happening. Similarly to his experiences in an alpine meadow, Donald "stays on the path" and is careful not to trample on anything. In the alpine meadow and in his direct contact with clients, he understands himself as being in the midst of life. He is a visitor to the client's experience, but part of a greater unfolding as well.

All living things and the landscapes they inhabit also play an important role in determining both our potential and our limitations as helpers. Jardine (1998) referred to this as discovering one's "humusness" (p. 82) and the source of great humility. We see this humility at work in my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula. I was struck by Donald's comment that interpreting clients' difficulties benefits the therapist's own ego more than it results in care for the client. This challenged me to reconsider my own tendency to interpret the problems of others and prompted me to reconsider the (smug?) satisfaction that I gain by finally "figuring out" a particular client's problem. Rena did not fall into this trap. She imagined herself as an equal and participating member of the healing groups that she facilitated. She felt that it is disrespectful not to share at least part of her own healing journey with other women. She did not presume to know more than her clients, and she understands the healing process as something much more than what solely transpired between herself and the other women.

Not only does humility emerge from Donald's and Rena's experiences in the more-than-human world, but these experiences also provide a pedagogical source to learn how to respond to the suffering of others. The claim of an ecological identity dispels the artificial boundaries that have been erected between humans and the natural environment, as well as among humans themselves. In this regard suffering is not something observed by an objective bystander, but a phenomenon that, when it is responded to, involves an act of participation. Macy and Brown (1998) pointed out that the origin of the word *compassion* includes the notion of "suffering with" (p. 27). In Macy and Brown's view, any attempt to respond to suffering without being touched or affected by it can be characterized by the word *apatheia* (p. 26)—the desire to avoid suffering.

Donald, Rena, and Paula listen carefully to the people with whom they work. Their presence to the suffering of others is accompanied by a profound and deep silence. They do not rely upon language to talk their way through or around suffering; they understand that much of our suffering is beyond language and in many ways is unspeakable. Relying upon silence rather than words, however, does not render Donald, Rena, and Paula impotent. On the contrary, because of their experience in nature, they understand that silence offers the people with whom they work a unique opportunity to encounter themselves and the world around them in a way that can help them heal.

Nicholsen (2002 ) suggested that our encounters in nature can teach us that it is only in silence that we can be fully present to our suffering. In silence we are given the chance to live in the vulnerable place of meeting life on its own terms. Nicholsen argued that when we avoid suffering, we create conditions that allow for the roots of madness to flourish. If left unattended, our fears and anxieties control our lives and can lead to decisions that can be easily described as insane. Nicholsen argued that because so much of our suffering has a namelessness quality, we have no option but to bring our direct and uninterrupted attention to it. In silence our suffering comes to meet us, and we are given the opportunity to *live* with our pain in a more direct and open manner.

Nicholsen (2002) went on to say that not only does silence offer the opportunity to engage our suffering in a direct way, but it is also filled with possibility. In her words, "this silence of nature is more than an absence of human language. It is an overarching sense of both containment and potential, of vitality ever emerging and not yet grasped." (p. 20). As we have seen in chapter 4, when we are immersed in the silence of nature, the notion of self comes into the question and the experience of *being* comes to the fore. This is a dynamic experience because we lose the narrow, rigid form of identity to which we have become accustomed, only to find at a deeper level that we are part of an ever-changing world. In this place, "where our interior selves meet with nature's open interior" (p. 26), we begin to understand suffering in a different way.

Our suffering is not a static, lifeless object that sits in rigid form in our bodies but, rather, a life process that can be found in every corner of the universe. In this regard our suffering can be understood as a sign that we are indeed alive and part of a greater web of life that shares life-death, destruction-recreation processes with us. We can choose to deny our suffering by ignoring its role in our lives, or we can choose to accept it and understand it as an essential condition of being alive. In the silence of nature, we can encounter our suffering in a more genuine way and, in turn, learn things about ourselves that will help us to live our lives in a more peaceful and caring manner. Goldstein and Kornfield (1987) described this encounter clearly:

> To let go, to drop and put down our whole past and future, all of our identifications, our fears our opinions, and whole sense of "I", me," and "mine," . . . to see how we're all in it together, accept birth and death, . . . only when we have seen the nature of life directly can we put it down. And once we put it down, then, with understanding and compassion we can pick it up again. (p. 169)

Donald, Rena, and Paula are not apathetic in their responses to clients. They bring their open selves to the helping encounter. Donald understands his work as a dynamic process that encompasses an embodied act of exploring the psychic and emotional space of his clients. Paula acknowledged her vulnerability and the possibility of being emotionally hurt in her work, and Rena actually described herself as a participant in the healing process of others. All three individuals take on an active and dynamic role in their work. However, their work is not entirely guided by language. They listen carefully to their clients and bear witness (similarly to other animals, in Rena's view) to their suffering. They participate as a person might behave sitting beside a beautiful creek. They fully embrace the counter and live deeply in the moment. They wait patiently for whatever unique form of life comes before them.

### *In the Service of Life*

Throughout my second conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula it became apparent that they bring a unique perspective to their work. In an embodied way they are able to perceive their clients not only as separate living entities, but also as part of a larger dynamic world. In a practical sense the research participants bring a "binocular" view to their work. They consistently are able to link their clients' struggles to a wider world that includes a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between the individuals or groups with whom they work and the life world in which they are engaged. Fisher (2002) argued that this is generally not the case in the helping professions. To his understanding, the helping professions locate pathology and healing at an individual level and consider interaction between people and the world at large as a benign and irrelevant factor. I am challenged by this idea because my own education as a clinical social worker has taught me to reduce a client's situation to a manageable portion to be able to conduct a problem-solving process that will eliminate *the* problem.

This makes it difficult for me to accept the invitation that my research participants have offered to reconsider the horizons of my own understanding. In this regard I begin to ask myself, "What is missing?" In my view, Donald, Rena, and Paula bring a sense of life to the helping process that is quite unique and foreign to me. They understand life as a force, a process, or perhaps a spirit that encompasses all living things. They understand themselves as part of this process, and because of their own "open indebtedness," (Jardine, 1998, p. 91) they pay great respect to all that this force creates. As I ponder the meaning of this life force, I begin to understand that because I am missing this particular sensitivity, my own view of the helping process is quite fragmented and linear.

Clark (1998) put this life force into perspective: "Before the self, there is being, and before being is the unconscious primordium" (p. 424). Kovel (1991) called this the "plasma of being" (p. 161) and pointed out that "in the universe as a whole, there is no real separation between things; there are only, so far as the most advance science can tell us, plasmatic quantum field; one single, endlessly perturbed endlessly becoming body" (p. 161) Clark's and Kovel's descriptions of this life force suggest that there is an aspect of being that connects us physically, psychologically, and ontologically with all other living beings. In addition, Kovel believed that the boundaries of identity are diminished when we discover our relationship to the primordial continuum.

Fisher (2002) argued that the role of the helper is to serve this life force in a respectful and mindful way. In retrospect, my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula demonstrate how this is done. Donald pays special attention to the way our bodies have been objectified to the point that our experiencing of the world has been thwarted. He described this as a state of disassociation form the rest of the world. To use Donald's analogy of humans as finely tuned instruments, many of the individuals with whom he works have become out of tune and struggle to resonate with the vibrations of the world. In regard to suffering, Rena plays the role of witness to the struggles of the women with whom she works. She helps transform their pain by using Kleenex to absorb their tears and then burns the Kleenex, which offers this pain through smoke to the greater world. Rena humbly understands that the spirit of the world has the capacity to heal and that her role is simply to facilitate this process. Paula is acutely aware of how organizations and the people who work in them stop growing when they lose contact with their immediate environment. Without this sense of meaning and connection to the outside world, spontaneity, creativity, and vitality are lost.

Donald, Rena, and Paula bring a deep humility, respect, and compassion to the people they help. They are able to relate to the people with whom they work on an individual level, but always understand them in relation to a greater world that is supported by a life force, spirit, or energy that is common to all living entities on this planet. Donald, Rena, and Paula provided excellent examples of how they pay attention to this life force and how in fact they *serve* it. "The person performing *seva* (the route word of service) does not try to change the world but to serve the world." (Kumar, 2004, p. 17). In many ways, serving others is the practice of obeying the natural laws that have existed through all of time. When we serve others, we take on the responsibility of bringing human attention back to the notion that our lives must always be understood in the multirelational and dynamic context in which they occur. It also suggests that we must act with respect and humility because this life force or ground of being works in ways that are always beyond our ability to understand:

> The person engaged in serving the world accepts his or her limits and offers himself or herself for the well being of others believing that the other is non other than I and I am none other than the other. There is no duality, nor separation between the one serving and the one served. Both exist in a web of relationships and both are seeking spiritual fulfillment as well as physical and material well being. (p. 17)

## *A World Divided*

Donald, Rena, and Paula leave no stone unturned in their work with the people, groups of people, or organizations they serve. They never see people as isolated beings who exist in a detached, impotent, and lifeless world. They bring a broader perspective to their work by bringing the world, in all its complexity and mystery, into the helping process and thus expanding the notions of suffering and healing. The participants do not see suffering a phenomenon that is lodged within the confines of a particular individual, but more as a problem that occurs within the relationships that make up our lives. In a similar vein, they see healing occurring in a relationship that can be considered safe, meaningful, and open to the myriad of possibilities that life offers.

It is within this context of a wider and broader understanding of suffering that a particular event that transpired in my second interview with Donald comes to mind. I was surprised to hear that when Donald asks his clients to think of a place where they feel safe enough to engage in emotional work, they often (approximately 80%) imagine a setting in nature. This struck me as odd because all of the people with whom Donald works live in an urban setting. My understanding of the hermeneutic endeavor compels me to ask, "What does this response mean?" and "What is the social and cultural context that helped precipitate this response?"

In my opinion, the response of Donald's clients can be understood as a reaction to the life-denying context in which we all live that is a consequence of an historic and progressive decoupling of human society from the wider society of nature (Rogers, 1994). Wendell Berry (1986) described this "encapsulation of the human order" as "the most dangerous tendency in modern society" (p. 130). Berry pointed out that when nonhuman life is excluded from our lives and made alien, it inevitably gets destroyed. He also argued that this separation from nature has major consequences because it is just this excluded life that is so essential, not only to our physical survival, but also to our emotional and spiritual survival.

The life-denying context we have created for ourselves is supported and sustained by what Fisher (2002) called the pattern of technology (p. 176), which has many facets that separate us from nature as well as each other. The power that technology gives us over nature leads us to believe that nature exists only to serve us. In this regard nature becomes a commodity to be used, bought, and sold for whatever purposes we want. Nature, transformed into a variety of commodities, is then sold back to us with the promise that, once we purchase them, we will be happy. However, our happiness is always delayed because of our deeply ingrained belief in the notion of progress, which encourages us to think that happiness can be found only in the future or, more specifically, in the next item we purchase.

In an overall sense, the pattern of technology narrowly defines us as either producers or consumers and reduces our core ethical imperative to making a profit. Our relationship to the greater world is defined, not through our direct experience of it, but through the technology we use to exploit it. In addition, the quality of our lives becomes measured by standards of economic progress rather than by the quality of the relationships and meaning in our lives. The pattern of technology is a dangerous path because it is built upon the premise that humans are not connected to the earth. This pattern or path has no ground of being and no life-sustaining character. It is an artificial path, created by humans, that steers us away from all other life on this planet and, in doing so, has the potential to lead us to the calamitous place of being desperately lost in a world built by our own devices.

Loy (1992b) argued that the path of technology bears no spiritual satisfaction and provides no cultural framework to integrate humans with the larger world. He also suggested that this path leaves us in a perpetual state of lack or wanting, which results in our being at constant odds and conflict with our environment, and that our separation from the rest of life induces great anxiety. Within this state of anxiety we desperately grasp at fame, romantic love, money, and the false promise of progress (things will get better) to help us cope. Moreover, Fisher (2002) contended that in many ways we have lost our bearings, and, as a result, we are in a state of psychic fragmentation and disintegration. In this respect our lives become something to endure and survive. In this context Lasch (1984) suggested that humans are reduced to a "minimal self" (p. 16) with little capacity to care for ourselves let alone one another.

In my opinion, the response of Donald's clients is an attempt to reach across the schism that exists between humans and the more-than-human world. From the monotonous confines of suburbs and a world filled exclusively with human artifacts, people become limited in their ability to interpret their place in the world. Evernden (1992) argued that it is difficult to create meaning in a world where all we find is ourselves. Fisher (2002) asserted that our modern living context has no way of meeting our transhistorical need to engage nature in a meaningful way. As we saw in chapter 5, responding to the invitation of nature allow us to understand ourselves in deeper ways. Whereas the pattern of technology may leave us orphans imprisoned in a world of our own making, reaching out to nature gives us the opportunity to interpret ourselves in a much broader and more holistic way. We have the opportunity to understand ourselves as kin who live in relationship with a myriad of others who are joined together in a greater unfolding called *life*.

### *Suffering*

This perspective challenges me to reconsider the notion of suffering. It suggests that any human struggle at an individual level must always be seen in the context of a human world that has separated itself from nature. Glendinning (1994) suggested that the separation from nature must be considered an original trauma that reverberates throughout society in every aspect of its functioning. She believed that our psychopathological behavior and addictive behaviors can be linked to our separation from nature and our resulting inability to meet our basic emotional, spiritual, and communal needs. Masterson (1988) attributed the rise in personality disorders in North America to the fragmentation and disintegration of the modern individual and linked the increase in these disorders to our separation from nature. He also associated the psychological themes that are prevalent in North America, such as "fear of abandonment, emphasis on the self to the exclusion of others, difficulties in intimacy and creativity and with the assertion of the real self" (p. vii), with a disconnection from a greater world of life.

This wider understanding of suffering challenges the tendency to link any form of "diagnosis" to a particular individual because it is built on the erroneous assumption that disease or pathology exists within the skin-encapsulated confines of the individual. With this in mind, Kovel (1988) described diagnostic tools such as the DSM-III (used prevalently within the psychiatric profession), which locates pathology at an individual level as a form of oppression. These tools are oppressive because they fail to accommodate the idea that behavior and illness must be seen in the context of a greater, more pervasive trauma.

This trauma is associated with the grief that emerges when we begin to understand what we have done to the planet. It can be linked to intense feelings of loss, alienation, and separation as a result of our being cut off from the more-than-human world. In addition, it entails a sense of powerless and hopelessness as we struggle to find ways to cope with this deep wound. Macy and Brown (1998) argued that we have not coped well with the pain. We have numbed our hearts and minds, and this, in her opinion, has only led to great spiritual and moral decay, which she described as the presence of death (p. 2) in the human community. In regard to our healing, Macy urged us to overcome the Western tendency to deny suffering. Every great religion in the world calls upon us to consider suffering as a source of great emotional and spiritual growth. Our suffering is a sign that something must be addressed. Our apathy (desire not to suffer) only prevents us from doing the work that we collectively need to do. In Macy's words:

> That pain is the price of consciousness in a threatened and suffering world. It is not only natural, it is an absolutely necessary component of our collective healing. As in all organisms, pain has a purpose: it is a warning signal, designed to trigger remedial action. (p. 27)

In all three cases, Donald, Rena, and Paula bring a greater, more diverse, more dynamic understanding of the world to the helping process that represents an attempt to overcome the schism that has transpired between humans and the rest of the world. Both Macy and Brown (1998) and Fisher (2002) suggested that our suffering, in whatever form it takes, cannot be addressed at an individual level; we need the rest of the world to hold or cradle our pain in a way that will help us to cope. Our relationships with the birds, trees, and landscapes in our lives allow us the psychic space to reinterpret ourselves and our suffering in ways that our creative, dynamic, and hopeful. Without these kinships, we would not be able to redefine ourselves in ways that will help us to address the challenges we face. As we have seen in chapter 5, our relationship to the diversity of life that surrounds us offers a rich and profound source from which to understand ourselves. Macy confirmed in her remark that engaging in a dialogue with the rest of the more-than-human world will allow for the possibility of a "shift in our identity that will be life saving in the sociopolitical and ecological traumas that lie before us" (p. 23).

### *Ecological Knowing*

The work of Donald, Rena, and Paula is an attempt to mend the wound that has resulted from our pervasive separation from the more-than-human world. In my second conversation with Donald, he spoke passionately about our relationship with the diversity of life with which we share the planet. He insisted that we must pay special attention to this relationship by making it a priority in our lives and that our relationship with nature must become an active part of our personal history. In Donald's opinion, paying attention and being faithful to this relationship help us to understand ourselves as part of a greater web of life, which in turn helps to guide us in our day-to-day lives.

In my second interview with Rena, I was surprised by her response related to my query about her spiritual work with clients. She quickly responded to this question by stating that she does not, in fact, engage in spiritual work because it is beyond her capacity. She described the world before us as a resource for this type of healing. It is the invisible world, full of spirit mentors represented in the animals that roam the earth, that we need to draw upon to heal our spiritual suffering. In a similar but perhaps more subtle way, Paula understands the health of the organizations with which she works in the context of a dynamic and ever-changing world. She understands organizations as a microcosm of the greater world in which they exist. As the natural world encompasses cycles of growth and decay, so too do organizations. Similarly to Donald and Rena, Paula argued that we cannot separate humans or the institutions they create from the dynamic and ever-changing world in which they exist.

My research participants' responses challenged what I now realize was my own anthropocentric view of the helping process. The prejudice that confronted me was a deeply held assumption that the helping process merely encompasses two bodies that are bound by the discourse that transpires between them. I sustained this subject-object prejudice by using the specific method (built upon scientific principles) that I had been taught. This limited and narrow understanding excluded the greater world from the helping process and in turn made silent the infinite interpretative possibilities that the world of wind, sky, sun, and stars offers. Upon further reflection, it is clear that my research participants were keenly aware of the importance of addressing this artificially constructed human-nature split.

In an overall sense, Donald, Rena, and Paula bring an ecological way of knowing to their work. They understand humans as participants in a broader field of relationships that include not only immediate familial, cultural, or social groups, but also the biotic community. Boff (1997) defined the stance associated with an ecological way of knowing in this way:

> A living creature cannot be seen in isolation as a mere representative of a species. It must always be seen and analyzed in relation to the totality of vital conditions that that constitute it and in balance with all the other representatives of the community of living beings present. (p. 3)

In Boff's view, ecological knowing challenges us to move our attention from our immediate environment outward to what he described as the *total* environment that encompasses "the knowledge of the relations, interconnections interdependencies, and exchanges of all with all, at all points, and at all moments" (p. 3). In this regard, what struck me about my second conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula was their refusal to talk about the world in any reduced or fragmented way. They consistently consider humans as essentially relational beings who are in perpetual and dialectical relationship with a greater world.

Boff (1997) suggested that what is unique about the ecological knowledge is

> its transversality; namely the fact that it relates laterally (ecological community), frontward (future) backward (past), and inwardly (complexity) all experiences and

> all form of comprehension as complementary and useful in our knowledge of the universe, and our role within it, and in the cosmic solidarity that unites us to all. (p. 4)

Boff linked this perspective with the concept of holism (*holos* in Greek means totality). Holism, according to Boff, represents something new (p. 4) because, rather than breaking the world into an endless number of parts, holism challenges us to translate the grasp of the organic and open whole of reality. Donald supported this notion when he described the world as an interconnected web of life and explained that, when we tug on one part, all other parts are affected. In a similar vein, Rena continually referred to the world as a sacred whole and emphasized our ethical responsibility to this greater whole and all that it encompasses.

This holistic view is radical in that it provides a critical stance towards any etiology of human suffering that attempts to reduce suffering to simplistic and one-dimensional form. When we fail to live in a way that acknowledges our deeply reciprocal relationship with the rest of the world, our behavior leads not only to environmental problems, but social problems as well. This raises the ethical question of how we live in an essentially relational world. Every action in which we engage must always be linked to the question of how our behavior impacts this greater whole. Boff asked, "How are we, human beings and environment, with our common origin and common destiny, to survive together?" (p. 4). He described the world "as a symphony of life" (p. 4) and challenged his readers to try to understand the part that they play in this symphony.

In retrospect, the work of Donald, Rena, and Paula is saturated with the principles associated with an ecological way of knowing and a holistic understanding of the world. They demonstrate a deep understanding of the highly relational world in which we live and make a sincere attempt to link both the struggles that people face and the potential to address these struggles with a world beyond merely social enterprise. Donald clearly links a person's internal environment (to which he interestingly referred as a house filled with many rooms) to the external environment. More specifically, he averred that the health of our internal environments and our external natural environments are deeply linked. As Boff (1997) argued, "There is an internal ecology just as surely as there is an external ecology, and they mutually condition each other" (p. 6).

Thus it is no surprise that Rena facilitates a healing process that takes place on land that has not suffered at the hands of human activity. She understands that a healthy earth and all the manifestations of life that it offers are an essential context for healing. Boff (1997) described this continuum between our internal health and the quality of the natural environment as *mental ecology*. In his view, our physical, emotional, and spiritual health can never be separated from the well-being of the planet: "If the world is ill, that is a sign that our psyche is ill" (p. 6).

Paula described very articulately how organizations that have lost contact with their external environments can easily implode. More important, she implied that organizations and the people who work in them can work in ways that are more in accordance with ecological principles. Paula's ideas are congruent with the principles of *social ecology* and the work of Murry Bookchin (1980). Bookchin clearly linked the environmental challenges that we face with the way that society is constructed. More specifically, he viewed the alienation of human beings from their environment as the result of class, race, and gender struggles that, over time, have led individuals to subjugate one another and the environment in the pursuit of power and domination.

Bookchin suggested that organizations can diminish these hazards of domination by operating more upon ecological lines and called for the organizations we develop and the communities we create to allow for complexity, diversity, and nonhierarchical ways of functioning. In my view Paula enacts these principles in her work because she attempts to address the logic of domination that is so deeply ingrained in the people and institutions with which she works.

In a metaphorical sense, my second conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula "opened up the world" to me in a way I had not considered. I am challenged to think of social work practice in a wider and deeper way—wider in the sense that social work practice encompasses the notion that the human endeavor always takes place in a dynamic and open system we call the world, and deeper in the sense that our lives emerge from within an essentially reciprocal and dialectical relationship with this world. Social work practice is a process that occurs in a dynamic, multirelational world, which challenges my role as a social worker because I no longer find myself in the secure confines of an objective, rational observer. On the contrary, I find myself in the same world as everybody else! My research participants clearly understood this and subtly, yet powerfully spoke about ways to enact this wisdom.

### Wider and Deeper Ecological Social Work

My second conversation with Donald, Rena, and Paula have helped me to imagine the general landscape that I might encounter in my attempt to explain what it means to practice social work in an ecologically congruent way. In some ways this landscape feels familiar to me, but in other ways it feels quite different. In my opinion, this experience of knowing and not knowing represents the horizon or limits of my own understanding.

Fortunately, Donald, Rena, and Paula have assisted me in developing some conceptual tools to navigate this new landscape. I am attuned in a way that will help me to resist the urge to break this landscape into a set of differentiated and manageable parts. In this regard I will be able to make links between the myriad of life systems that make up this landscape. This, in turn, will facilitate my understanding of this new landscape as an essentially relational and dynamic whole. Most important, I will be leery of any illusion (for whatever linguistic or epistemological reasons) from which I can extricate myself in whatever place I find myself.

It is this understanding of myself as a participant and not a detached observer that will set the moral compass for this journey. I will make my way with a deep respect and caring for *all* life. The ethical imperative I bring will be different from how social workers are normally guided by their social work ethics. I agree with Hill (1992), who suggested that, in general, professional codes of ethics are anthropocentric in character because they "stress responsibility to the employer and the client, but not the planet and to future generations" (p. 11). Therefore the social work code of ethics could limit the way I make my way through this new terrain. I prefer to follow the guidance that Donald, Rena, and Paula offered in considering a more comprehensive way of how poverty, violence, and childrearing can be understood.

Since the inception of social work in the 19th century, social workers have been concerned with the impact of poverty. A great deal of the social work effort has been to address the underlying causes of poverty and to advocate and support those who experience the crippling effects of poverty. In linking the social and ecological concerns we face today, however, the traditional notion of poverty must be expanded. Perhaps because of their own immersion in a social system that revolves around the importance of monetary value, social workers have tended to define poverty as merely a lack of financial resources. Although this, of course, is an important concern, Besthorn (2000) argued that it is a limited view and called for a broader understanding of poverty: "Poverty is seen not only in the lack of financial assistance and social support infrastructure but also in polluted water supplies, and unhealthy living quarters" (p. 3). Besthorn's comments are instructive in that he provides social workers with an expanded vision of what it means to live in poverty. His comments also suggest that if social workers focus only on poverty as a monetary/financial issue, they will fail to expose the root causes of both our social and our ecological woes.

In my view, poverty can also be expanded to include the idea that the destruction of the natural environment leaves us in a state of impoverishment because it limits our ability to create meaning in our lives. Abram (1996) argued that nature is not merely an abstraction debated by philosophers, but also the tangible core or ground of all human experience. In chapter 6 we have seen how the more-than-human world served as an essential source of meaning and led Donald, Rena, and Paula (and myself) to reconsider who we are as people and what it means to help other human beings. In this regard the question to ponder is whether or not our capacity to care for each other dies with every tree, animal, or ecosystem that is destroyed. McNutt and Hoff (1994) were similarly concerned that when humans destroy nature,

> we destroy ourselves, our irreplaceable source of sheer physical sustenance, as well as the source of our imaginative capacities for experiencing the penultimate realities of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Moreover, without the metaphorical resources from nature, to express those realities, our unique capacity to communicate conscious of the self and other would be severely impoverished, if not impossible. (p. 50)

The concern that Hoff and McNutt brought forward arose from the understanding that nature is both physically and metaphysically crucial to our survival. Ontologically, nature has consequences for the way we perceive ourselves and how we conduct ourselves in interactions with others. Berry (1988) added to this concern: "If we lived on the moon, our mind and emotions, our speech, our imagination, our sense of the divine would all reflect the desolation of the lunar landscape" (p. 11).

Fisher (2002) suggested that this state of impoverished meaning in which we find ourselves is a result of a particular form of violence that occurs when we initially destroy a natural habitat, which limits our capacity to create meaning in our lives. This loss is then exacerbated by the narrow producer/consumer lives we lead that restrict our potential to engage the earth in a deeply relational way. This form of violence is most pronounced when we consider its impact on children. In chapter 2 I explored the myriad of ways children identify with nature and the cognitive, psychological, and social benefits of this identification. Denying children the opportunity to engage directly with nature leads to what Louv (2005) described as "nature deficit disorder" (p. 99), which occurs when children lose the capacity to engage nature in a meaningful way. This, in Louv's opinion, is deeply problematic because when we lose the capacity to engage nature early on in our lives, we become severely hampered in our ability to address the environmental and social problems that we face later on in our adult lives. In this light I suggest that the destruction of our natural environment and the limited ways that we allow children to engage nature is a form of severe and profound child abuse.

This raises the question about how we generally raise our children and help prepare them to live in an ecologically sustainable way. Hill (1992) contended that our society does not value children and as a result does not meet the needs of children in a healthy and developmentally appropriate way. He pointed to critical flaws in our parenting styles that tend to encourage children not to trust their experiences and not to share feelings of vulnerability or hurt. When our painful feelings are internalized along with the general sense of feeling devalued, our capacity to engage in healthy relationships with others is diminished. Hill stated, "I believe that most of us have been significantly wounded as children and that the denial of this, and consequential lack of recovery, is the main barrier to our psychological development and to genuine progress towards sustainability" (p. 5).

When we do not address the trauma associated with our childhood experiences, we merely relocate them in time and space. As adults our hurt selves desperately seek ways to address our pain as we engage in highly problematic ways of coping. Hill (1992) suggested that people who experience this type of trauma in their early lives "close off their awareness, feel confused, become disempowered, secretive, often lonely, afraid and competitive, and commonly fear that there is not enough to go around. They develop ethics and values that are compensatory" (p. 10) More specifically, in relation to sustainable behavior, Hill pointed out that

> the hurt person confuses wants and needs, thinks more is better, assumes they are innocent until they get caught, and that ownership gives freedom. Hurt people want to simplify everything so that it is easier for them to feel in control; they confuse symbols of power with real power, readily blame others, don't question "get the enemy" talk, and are attracted to magic-bullet curative solutions and technologies that claim to transcend natural limits. (p. 10)

Conversely, people who experience low physical and emotional stress in their childhood or are supported in the healing process

> are able to keep their attention fully in the present, are keenly aware of their environment and of what is going on within their bodies, and they are able to think clearly and act responsibly. They make commitments, be supportive, distinguish needs from wants, be ethical, deal with complexity, treat the causes of problems rather than the symptoms, and accept natural limits. (p. 11)

Although Hill's (1992) comments might be considered extrapolative, they do challenge me to think differently about the traditional role that social workers have played in the care and protection of children and to widen my understanding of what comprises a healthy environment for children. This is a question that social workers are often asked to consider. In my view, however, what is most compelling about Hill's argument is that it makes the case that how we care for and protect children (a central role in the social work practice lexicon) is indeed critical in developing an ecologically sustainable society.

A wider, more ecological understanding of violence, poverty, and the problematic ways that we raise our children reveal an essentially destructive pattern. In an overall sense, the more that humans destroy nature, the less capable they become of meeting the social and ecological problems of our times. Without birds, trees, and natural habitat, we lose our capacity to understand ourselves as essentially relational beings. This leaves us vulnerable to the development of a human identity that lacks the maturity to deal with the problems we face today. Shepard (1982) argued that for humans to become fully mature, they must have the opportunity to engage nature, in all its forms, in every stage of their lives. He compared the stages of human development today to those of an adolescent. In his view, humans are preoccupied with themselves and have little capacity to consider the needs of others, let alone the ethical know-how to live in the world in a responsible manner. Shepard suggested that only when we have continual and uninterrupted access to the more-than-human world will we develop an identity that will allow us to mature as human beings. He described human maturity as follows:

> There is also inherent in maturity an acceptance of ambiguity, of tensions between the lust for omnipotence and the necessity to manipulate, between man as different and man as a kind of animal, and especially between a growing sense of the separateness of the self and kinship to the Other, achieved through an ever-deepening fullness of personal identity, defined by a web of relationship and metaphorical common ground. (pp. 13-14)

I believe that Shepard's (1982) description of a mature human identity is remarkably similar to that of an ecological identity described in chapter 5. Ecological identity emerges from our direct experiences in the more-than-human world that help us to understand ourselves as deeply relational beings. Our relationship with Other sentient beings is represented in a dynamic process in which we discover a precarious and ambiguous boundary between ourselves and the rest of the world. It is on this cusp of self and no-self that we discover the humbling fact that our identity only surfaces and is supported and sustained by the very world in which we exist. The illusion that we can rationally or abstractly determine our identity is lost to the wisdom that we are deeply relational creatures and live in a world of reciprocity and mutuality with all others. Similar to Shepard's notion of mature identity, an ecological identity reveals humans as participants or kin in a greater unfolding world.

The mature identity to which Shepard (1982) referred and ecological identity as described in chapter 5 can be contrasted to the postmodern identity described in chapter 1. In general, postmodern identity is described as fragmented, hollow, and self-absorbed. In an overall sense, humans interpret themselves through a world that they themselves have created. Our primary relationships involve urban environments saturated with human artifacts, a growing number of simulated environments, and digital symbols offered through a multitude of formats. Identifying primarily with artificial environments has led to what I would describe as an artificial identity. The root word of *artificial*, *artificee*, refers to "a clever trick," and the word *artificial* connotes "man made, not occurring naturally; made in imitation of something not natural, not sincere" (Sinclair et al., 1998, p. 22).

This artificial identity is highly illusionary because it is not rooted in the organic world; it has no form of life associated with it, no breath, no heart, no sensual relationship with the world. It merely exists within a precarious abstract environment that humans, in the Western world in particular, have created. The clever trick that we have constructed leads us to believe that we are the center of the world and that all meaning resides with us, which Gottschalk (2001) described as an "anthropocentric/textual knot" (p. 6). When humans become bound by this knot, they live in ways in which they place their needs and wants before any other life form. This in turn develops into an ethos of domination and privilege. As the anthropocentric knot tightens, however, this privilege is extended to fewer and fewer people. Those who have the resources to live in this bifurcated world survive, whereas those who do not suffer. As the knot tightens, geography, race, gender, access to technology and financial resources become factors in determining who is allowed the breath of life and who is not.

In an overall sense this artificial identity is problematic because it diminishes our capacity to interpret the world. The narrow, individualistic, social, and economic identity that we have created for ourselves brings with it a propensity to interpret nature in a way that only meets our self-interest. Polk (1999) has shown how nature can be interpreted in a way that allows those in power to decide what sexual orientation is "natural" and what sexual orientation is "unnatural." Evernden (1992) clearly traced how human society has constructed the meaning of nature to meet their own needs and political interests and how these constructions have become deeply embedded in our language and construed as fact. In this regard the interpretation of nature becomes a deeply political activity.

It is our unquestioned beliefs about nature that provide the biggest challenge to social work. Gotleib (1996) suggested that humans have developed a closed feedback loop between themselves and nature. Humans interpret nature in ways that reify their socially constructed identity and support their self-interest. For example, our stories about nature are saturated with the notion that only "the fittest" survive. Despite Fox's (1990) concerns that this concept (borrowed from evolutionary Darwinism) is questionable and must not be taken out of context, humans have used it for their own devices. They have appropriated the violence between animals into a type of social Darwinism, which renders humans immune to the suffering of others because people's struggle in our society is seen as a "natural" consequence of a completely "natural" competitive economic system.

Gotlieb (1996) suggested that social Dawarnism makes it *natural* for people to suffer at the expense of the human enterprise, no matter what the cost. Social Darwinism justifies the behavior of the "winners" in our economic system and at the same time blames the "losers" for not being strong enough, smart enough, or hard-working enough. In my view this presents a critical challenge to the profession of social work. The people with whom social workers work are no longer seen as victims as much as they are simply individuals who deserve their plight because of particular personal limitations or deficiencies. In this context the role of social work changes from being a social *change* endeavor to one of social *control*. Social workers are expected to behave like shepherds who tend to a herd of diseased and unwanted animals. They are expected to care for these pathetic creatures in a manner that keeps them away from the daily occurrences of their lives and at the same time negate any potential for them to assume at least partial responsibility for their suffering.

Our limited and narrow view of ourselves not only restricts the way that we interpret nature, but it also limits our capacity to address the social and environmental problems that we face. Fox (1990, p. 204) linked our narrow understanding of ourselves with the preservation and conservation initiatives found within the environmental movement In his view both initiatives are simply strategies to ensure that the ego is not disturbed and that our atomistic identities, imbued with self-interest, are not threatened. Gotleib (1996) used a similar argument but applied it to the conservative and liberal discourse that attempts to determine ways to alleviate human suffering. Like preservation and conservation efforts, however, the conservative and liberal discourses are simply strategies that maintain the status quo by ensuring that no structural or systemic changes are made that threaten or destabilize White, middle-class, economic man.

Gotlieb (1996) clearly argued that environmental or social change will not occur unless we expand our narrow social and cultural identities. In his view, any attempt at radical change will be doomed if a political strategy simply supports and appropriates the narrow understanding that we have ourselves. "Thus, when progressive social movements take the conventional social ego for granted and seek to fulfill it, they are typically unable to encounter our society's suicidal preoccupation with success, consumption and spectacle" (p. 523). Gotlieb called for an identity in which we understand ourselves as members of a biotic community as well as a social community. An identity of this type is a spiritual endeavor that entails "that basic values such as birth and death (rather than murder or destructive consumption or co modification), identifying with other life forms, a sense of connection and participation in one's place" (p. 524). This wider and deeper identity can inform our political demands in a way that may indeed lead to substantial change.

> We can begin to be self-critical about ourselves, our particular ethnic, religious, or economic group-for we can find our identity is not totally rooted in any human location or connection. We are part of tree and sky, as much as we are our bank account or racial history. Surely this realization will help free us emotionally from some of our compulsion to dominate other people or the earth. . . . Surely this will help us learn to live with others—with our fears and greeds—in a much more sustainable way. (pp. 524-525)

The veneer of this artificial identity is losing its luster, however, and the clever trick with which we have been so enamored is slowly revealing itself for what it is. The anthropocentric/textual knot has become so tight that the question of human identity is being raised on a number of fronts. Haraway (1991) referred to human identity as a *cyborg* and challenged us to consider the role that science and technology have played in the development of human identity. Maalouf (2000) raised alarms about a human identity that is desperately self-absorbed and flagrantly hostile to other forms of life and dramatically described this identity as a monster. As we have already seen, Shepard (1982) considered human identity developmentally immature. He likened human behavior that emerges as a result of this identity to a form of madness that will no doubt continue unless humans can reengage the more-than-human world in a more comprehensive and meaningful way.

Within the environmental discourse, the notion of identity often revolves around the issue of gender. For example, ecofeminist thinkers argue that it is not *anthro*pocentricism, but rather *andro*pocentrism that is the root cause of today's severe environmental and social problems. In an overall sense, this has led to a productive debate between ecofeminist and deep-ecology thinkers. Although this has been a productive debate, in my opinion it has sometimes limited the possibilities that might be available in the attempt to reconceptualize human identity. In this regard I suggest that the concept of ecological identity be included in the environment-identity discourse. In the spirit of deep ecology, I offer this suggestion as an invitation and not as a pronouncement that ecological identity must be considered over and above any other identity. I believe that the main contribution that the concept of ecological identity makes to the identity discourse is that it keeps the question of identity alive and does not allow it to become static or foreclose on itself. As we have seen in chapter 5, an ecological identity leaves no stone unturned in terms of what might contribute to our identity as human beings.

Boff (1997) did an excellent job of describing the various logics that underpin identity discourse. He initially referred to a logic of identity that is simplistic and linear and supports authoritarian systems and systems of dominance. The logic of *difference*, on the other hand, recognizes nonidentity by recognizing otherness and its right to exist. *Dialectical logic* contrasts identity and difference, "enclosing them in a dynamic process in which identity is seen to be like a thesis (proposition)" (p. 24). The logic of *complementarity* and *reciprocity* builds upon dialectical logic by recognizing complexity related to identity formation and the deeply relational context in which identity emerges.

Finally, Boff described a *dialogical* or *perichoretic* identity, which attempts to include dialogue from all directions and at all times. In Boff's view, this form of identity logic takes the most inclusive stance possible and is the one identity logic that is least inclined to behavior that produces victims.

In my view, dialogical or perichoretic logic underpins ecological identity. It provides the impetus to develop a wider understanding of social work because it does not create an artificial schism between humans and the rest of the world, nor does it marginalize or exclude other sentient beings from answering the question of what it means to be a human being. As we have seen in chapter 5, an ecological identity emerges from an experience of the world as a dynamic, essentially relational, open system that leads to an ecological or holistic way of knowing. In this regard the social work profession is challenged to resist the long-held tradition (particularly in Western thought) to divide the world into an objectified number of fragmented parts. Shepard (1982) argued that history demonstrates that when humans began to develop an identity that separated themselves from the rest of the world, they began carving up the world for their own purposes. This has resulted in needless suffering and death. In this light, Boff (1997) stated that a wider ecological view requires that social workers

> reject closed ideas, mistrust one-way causality, to strive to be inclusive in the face of all exclusions, to be unifying in the face of all disjunctions, to take a holistic approach in the face of all reductionisms, and to appreciate complexity in the face of all oversimplifications. (p. 13)

In terms of a deeper ecological social work, social workers must be critical of any identity that assumes an agency (ethos) in the world that dominates Others (human and nonhuman). This problematic identity is built upon the assumption that the organic world has utilitarian value only and as a result can be exploited no matter what the cost. Thus, the cost is high because both human and nonhuman entities suffer. I suggest that the emphasis of the profession of social work on the notion of social justice is limited and must include the notion of *ecological* justice as well. Ecological justice raises questions about the right to live for *all* sentient beings, not only humans. It also suggests that violence against nature has a reverberating impact throughout the world. This violence not only challenges our capacity to create meaning in our lives, but also impacts the most marginalized and disenfranchised people in the world, as Boff (1997) so aptly declared in the title of his book, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. With this in mind, Macy and Brown (1998) suggested that it becomes more and more clear that the "old divide between activists in defense of social and economic rights and those in defense of nature no longer holds. It is increasingly evident that their goals are inseparably linked and mutually reinforcing" (p. 48)

## Ecopedagogy

Although my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula revolved around ecological identity and implications for practice, our conversations also had a dramatic impact on the way that I think about social work education. I have been a social work educator for approximately 19 years and feel very privileged to have the opportunity to prepare adults to meet the demands of the social work profession. In an overall sense, this research project has brought a new life to the way that I reflect upon my role as an educator. My understanding of human identity has changed, and as a result my understanding of what it means to practice and teach social work has also changed. It is these experiences that led me explore the concept of ecopedagogy and how it might guide me in fulfilling my responsibility as a social work educator.

On a personal level, the exploration of an ecological identity has encompassed an experience of loss. Exploring ecological identity was in many ways like sitting in a sinking boat. The boat that held my identity quickly lost its structural integrity as I learned more about the interpretive quality of language, the problematic notions associated with Western identity, and the limits of understanding the world through reason alone. In many ways I was stripped of the very devices that I used to keep myself afloat. I began to experience the emotions of fear and anxiety that accompany a person whose boat is going down. Slowly but surely, I sank into the deep, mysterious, mercurial waters. I tried desperately to hold on to what was familiar—my ego, my sense of self, my intellectual reasoning—but it was all no avail. I had to let go.

In order to survive, I began to rely more directly upon my own embodied, kinesthetic experience, which allowed me to navigate the waters in which I had become immersed. This became a transformational experience because I began to experience myself in a much different way. I was not a detached observer of the world who could stay afloat in a highly precarious conceptual boat. Rather, I discovered that I was more like a swimmer or participant in a highly relational world that influenced me as much as I influenced it. Smith (1999a) suggested that as we relinquish the linguistic, rational, and cultural claims of identity and rely more upon our direct experience of the world, we become "finely attuned to the realities of the world, according to the world's own nature" (p. 464). As I became more attuned to the world, my desperate preoccupation with identity diminished, and at the same time my desire to act in morally responsible manner increased.

This sense of attunement is an excellent place from which to explore the concept of ecopedagogy. The sense of attunement prevents me from engaging in dualistic thinking and challenges me to consider the unity of the world that preexists prior to my tendency to divide it. In this regard ecological pedagogy is not a term to be understood in a dualistic way. Jardine (2000) suggested that ecopedagogy portrays the ecological as deeply pedagogical and the pedagogical as deeply ecological and that when the pedagogical endeavor becomes disassociated from the very world that sustains it, our pedagogical intent is lost. This in my opinion is what can transpire in social work education. The concept of social justice, for example, becomes diminished when the more-than-human world is excluded from the interpretive process of determining what this term might mean.

We have seen in chapter 5 that listening closely to our experiences in the more-than-human world can lead to great wisdom. I suggest that this wisdom has a particular significance because it reveals an inherent *wildness* in the pedagogical endeavor. As Evernden (1992) described it , "Nature is ultra human" (p. 107). By this he meant that nature's mystery will always transcend the human capacity to explain it. The primordial space between experience and language will always exist. Therefore, pedagogy represents a persistent and continual *attempt* to understand the world. Our attempt to understand is a circular process that always entails the dynamic and mutual concepts of knowing and not knowing deeply embedded with its structure.

In exploring the tenets of the hermeneutic endeavor, I found that human meaning-making efforts must always be understood in the historic, cultural, and linguistic context in which they occur. In an ecological sense all meaning has a dynamic quality to it because it is always subject to further interpretation. This raises a particular skepticism towards any speaking subject who claims a particular truth or argues for a particular method. Truth and method become highly suspicious concepts because truth is always circumstantial, and method denies the unique and dynamic quality of the very phenomenon it hopes to address.

Ecopedagogy extends the hermeneutics process by including the more-than-human world in our meaning-making endeavor. Not only is our cultural and linguistic context a source of interpretation, but so is the world of bees, birds, and birch trees. More important, the more-than-human world is the ontological ground on which all meaning takes place. In this regard when we deny or ignore this relationship, we metaphorically squeeze the life out of pedagogy itself. Our meaning-making capacity is a result of our relationship with the world. In addition, our meaning-making efforts always say something about this relationship. In an overall sense ecopedagogy requires a particular sensitivity that requires us to pay special attention to every living thing and to acknowledge when the more-than-human world is being threatened by our meaning-making efforts. Jardine (2000) described this well:

> Ecopedagogical reflection thus has two vital inseparable moments. It involves the deeply spiritual attention required to be mindful of each gesture, each breath, and the cherishing of the interdependencies and inevitabilities that house us. It requires, in this sense, a phenomenology. But it requires also an ability to read and become mindful of the violations and comprises of such attention, of the violence and severances out of which so much of our lives and the lives of our children are built. It requires being able to read these violations back into the linguistic, cultural, social, political, economic, and philosophical soil out of which they which they have emerged. (p. 34)

In summary, the discourse associated with ecopedagogy raises many questions related to a more traditional view of social work education. This discourse challenges the notion of the all-knowing subject that can possess a hard and fast truth about the world. Ecopedagogical discourse is built upon the "wild" notion that our world will always exceed humans' capacity to understand it. In this way pedagogy is underpinned by a form of not knowing or ignorance that pedagogues have found difficult to admit. However, this does not suggest that our attempt to understand slips into total relativism. It simply means that any pedagogical statement or action has a particular life of its own depending upon the speaker and the context in which it occurs. As I discussed in chapter 3, meaning encompasses a circular process in which old preconceived prejudices change into new prejudices. Understanding takes on a death quality only when we assume that we have finally arrived at a place of knowing or when our knowing bears no resemblance to the relationship that we have with the organic, fecund, and beautiful world in which we live.

### *Ecopedagogy and Social Work Education*

The tenets inherent in ecopedagogy have significant ramifications for how we might think about social work education. In many ways ecopedagogy raises questions about the long-held assumptions associated with the preparation of social workers. Coates (2003) pointed out that social work education has long been associated with the scientific endeavor. To gain status as a profession, social work adopted the principles of science, which tend to objectify the world and reduce it to a number of fragmented, disconnected parts. Morris (2002) suggested that the scientific paradigm has become deeply embedded in all levels of education and renders pedagogy deaf to the sounds of a dying planet. In regard to social work education, Besthorn (2003) argued that the preparation of social workers requires a different model: "Our educational enterprise must change from being grounded in techno-specialist, anthropocentric orientation, toward an orientation which is far more generalist and ecologically relevant" (p. 62).

Besthorn (2003) described an alternative pedagogy that is very similar to the practices and processes associated with ecopedagogy. In terms of preparation for social work, Besthorn suggested that there is a need to "recognize that nature is the irreplaceable source of humankind's absolute physical sustenance and imaginative capacities and thus the hinge point of our theoretical orientations and practice strategies" (p. 3). He cautioned that social work practice requires a particular spiritual sensitivity. In his view, spirituality is inherently ecological, and ecology is inherently spiritual. Spirituality of this nature "impresses on our consciousness an awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things and the rightful place of humankind in the cosmic order" (p. 3). Finally, Besthorn argued that social workers need to be prepared to be politically involved because "human patterns of collective organization are inseparable from those of the natural world" (p. 3); as a result, there is a need to "question deeply and insistently the social, political, economic structures and assumptions of modern, industrial society" (p. 3).

Jardine (2000) explained that ecopedagogy is based on the premise of dwelling in our earthly household and raised the question of how a teacher might dwell in the classroom rather than leaving it through abstraction. In my view, dwelling in the classroom involves being in deep relationship with students. It demands an immediate presence in which each moment is considered the source and place from which all ethics arise. It is this pedagogical moment, the place where space and time merge, that the world reveals itself. The ethical imperative associated with ecopedagogy revolves around my ability to share and negotiate with my students the common physical, linguistic, and metaphorical space that exists. I consider this space a relational space because it is not owned by anyone, nor does any identity have privileged access to it.

Because of the deeply ethical nature of ecopedagogy, I must be mindful of the identity politics that are at play in the classroom. As a White, educated male it would be very easy for me to reenact the very identity oppression that occurs in the world. Avoiding this trap requires great self-awareness and an understanding of the important role that I can play in modeling respectful and caring behavior. In my opinion, the process of change and the relinquishment of old notions of self and identity do not occur under the hierarchical linguistic demands of "should" and "ought." Rather, any change at a personal level occurs by means of an authentic invitation that encourages students to trust their own personal experiences and to engage in dialogue that helps them to explore their relationship with the world around them.

The process associated with ecopedagogy challenges the notion of identity. I have already shared how the exploration of an ecological identity challenged me at a deeply personal level. From my experience I believe that an ecopedagogical endeavor leads one to become involved in a transformational process that initially involves a destabilization and subsequent loss of identity. This is instigated by a critical look at the role that language and culture play in my identity with a corresponding intent to listen more closely to the more-than-human world. Initially, this process was difficult, but, as I began to trust my emotions and what I call intuitive glimpses, I began to experience myself differently. In many ways the loss of the identity that I had held for so long precipitated a type of birth of sorts. This birth occurred when I found not only that I was in the world, but also that the world was in me.

In my view a key intent of the ecopedagogical endeavor is to destabilize our long-held traditional view of human identity. It is radical in the sense that it does not reify human identity, nor does it place human identity in a hierarchical or privileged position. In a hermeneutic sense, ecopedagogy brings the question of human identity to the forefront and, in the process, reveals its ambiguous character. Ecopedagogy questions the problematic identity we have created for ourselves and encourages us to consider other possibilities that do not arise from language or culture, but from our direct experience with the more-than-human world. This in turn can lead to a relinquishment and loss of sorts of a narrow, atomistic-bound identity and allows for a more holistic and mutual sense of ourselves. Thus the question of "Who am I?" becomes less and less important, and questions about the ethical quality of my relationships with Others come to the forefront.

In many ways this dissipation of identity leads to the development of an ecological consciousness. In Morris's (2002) view, ecological consciousness occurs as a result of our embodied experience of the world. Morris argued that consciousness is co-created with or emerges from our relationship with the world: "Consciousness and environment are entangled, confused, co-related, co-dependent. There is no way to separate consciousness from the environment without doing violence to the very ecosystem that sustains us" (p. 579). In a practical sense, social work educator John Coates (2003) contended that an ecological consciousness helps students to address the social ecological problems we face today. An ecological consciousness gives students the opportunity to make the "essential connection between the depth and breadth of environmental destruction and the current organization and function of society" (p. 107). More specifically, students begin to make links between their personal lifestyles and ecological destruction, have the capacity to connect ecological destruction with global economic institutions and government policies, and connect ecological destruction with social injustice.

The loss of familiar identity and the emergence of an ecological consciousness is, however, a difficult process. My experience reveals that students become overwhelmed when they discover how deeply entrenched human behavior toward the environment has become. More important, students begin to experience the pain associated with their own estrangement from the more-than-human world. In chapter 5, I suggested that our emotions can be seen as signposts that reflect the state of the relationship between our internal and external environments. As I mentioned in chapter 4, students often acknowledge deep feelings of grief and powerlessness over the degradation of the natural world. At this point I am embarrassed to say that, although these emotions in the classroom are palpable, I have not explored them directly. Macy and Brown (1998) advised that, because this type of despair is prevalent in our society, it must be addressed. I believe that exploring the grief and despair will help to heal the schism (wound) that has opened between students and the world and will help them to become more active agents in a world in which they belong, rather than succumbing to the apathy that is associated with feelings of deep alienation, separation, and loss.

However, the potential to revision the world is limited by the very language we use to describe the changes that we think should be made. Bowers (2002) was very critical of the language associated with critical pedagogy and argued that many of the root metaphors embedded within the critical pedagogy discourse hamper the development of what he described as eco-justice pedagogy. He listed a number of metaphors that prevent us from addressing the social and economic challenges of our times. These include the notion of linear progress, the idea that man was created separate and superior to the rest of the world, and the conceptualization of the individual as the basic social unit (pp. 26-27). According to Bowers, these root metaphors create a type of double bind of sorts because they limit the ways that we can think about ourselves and our place in the world. In fact, these metaphors are built upon the very assumptions that have led to the degradation of our planet:

> Indeed, the language based on the assumptions about progress, a human-centered world, and individualism leads to such a distorted understanding that environmentally caused diseases, cleaning up oil spills, and efforts to reverse degraded ecosystems are, at least in North America, treated as economic activities that contributed to the gross domestic product. More important is the way in which earlier assumptions encoded in the metaphorical language lead to pursuing the very policies and developments that further exacerbate the crisis. (p. 28)

Bowers (2002) argued that to facilitate a pedagogy of eco-justice, we should incorporate a metaphor of ecology into our discourse. In his view an ecological metaphor allows for diversity in terms of both how we think about ourselves and how we include others and allows for a much more dynamic and flexible approach in addressing today's social and ecological problems. Besthorn (2003) echoed Bowers' comments and suggested that the primary task of social work educators is to help students to reflect upon and adopt the root metaphor of ecology as a base from which to address the serious problems they will face in their careers.

The challenge that Bowers (2002) and Besthorn (2003) presented is not easy. In my view, engaging in a pedagogical endeavor that has at its heart an ecological sensibility is like swimming upstream in a world that at almost every turn undermines this perspective. As we have seen throughout this research project, our history, language, social interactions, and social institutions have emerged in a way that "flows" in the opposite direction of what an ecological way of knowing calls for. Although enacting an ecological sensibility in the classroom may seem daunting, I found evidence in my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula that this can be done. Their understanding of what ecological identity means and the way that they described their practice as social workers provoke me to think about how the metaphor of ecology could be integrated more deeply into the way I talk about social work education.

### *Teaching Social Work: A Personal Reflection*

In many ways social work education involves a process or journey that leads both educators and students alike to a place of profound humility that represents an embodied experience that lies beyond language and culture and is surrounded by the discernible silence of the world. We become immersed in the world in a way that allows us to become attuned not only to the process and dynamics associated with life, but also to those factors that lead to or promote death. This sense of attunement or sensitivity is associated with feelings of wonder and awe as well as deep feelings of sadness and despair. It is clear, however, that these feelings must be experienced and not relocated to the realm of abstraction because they are signs that we are alive, and they are evidence that we are indeed participating in a larger process called life.

During the process of traveling on the journey towards humility, a number of "items" are left behind. Cast aside is the almost manic Western tendency to search for a definable and autonomous self. Language becomes less and less useful in this journey, whereas our ability to trust our embodied experience becomes more important in helping us to find our way. As we proceed along this journey, the path becomes less and less distinct and slowly opens up to what I would describe as a worldly meadow. As this meadow comes more and more into view, a unique sense of ourselves as relational beings emerges. We experience ourselves as part of the preexistent unity that is the world and understand that we co-emerge in participation with this unity. In this meadow the world cannot be divided. As a result, the idea of social work and social work education takes on a different form.

Because the world cannot be divided, I now understand that suffering occurs along the fracture lines that humans create as a result of a particular type of violence that occurs when we act in ways that deny our deep and utterly interdependent relationship with all others. Perhaps the most specific example of this fracturing is represented in the artificial line that humans have drawn between themselves and the more-than-human world. We have seen how children, animals, and other sentient beings suffer along the edges of this fracture line. But there are other ways that we divide and fracture the world as well. We find these fracture lines at the very points of oppression that are rampant in the world today. Whenever we marginalize people because of gender, race, age, disability, income level, and so on, we draw (or perhaps *construct* is a better word) lines that are artificial and inevitably lead to suffering. These artificial lines become deeply ingrained in our understanding of the world and create deep schisms that are difficult to bridge. When this occurs, our ability to respond to the suffering of others becomes greatly diminished.

These human-constructed fracture lines lead to a narrow understanding of human suffering. Looking over the schism that we have created between ourselves and all others leads us to "watch" suffering from afar and to locate it in a particular place, in a particular individual, at a particular time. This is a very narrow and problematic view. In an undivided world suffering can be understood as a worldly phenomenon and one that cannot be seen in static isolation. We are all participants in this suffering world. We are impacted not only by the way that we divide the world, but also how we attempt to extricate ourselves from the processes of life. In part, the lines that we draw between ourselves and others represent a desperate attempt to avoid suffering. Our propensity to avoid suffering is reflected in the methods and skills we adopt, which gives us the illusion that we can "fix" suffering. This is problematic, however, because this type of fix does not lead to any lasting or sustainable change.

If we consider suffering as part of life and as a sign that something is amiss, we are presented with the opportunity to be involved in more creative and sustainable change. In my opinion, change does not originate from an identity that is "manufactured" from a socially constructed world. This identity is quick to fix and quick to act, but has met with few positive results. No matter what identity we create for ourselves, professional or personal, an identity is waiting to be explored. This identity is one that emerges when we respond to the invitation of nature. However, an ecological identity resists any tendency to bifurcate identity through binaries that separate humans from nature, theory from practice, and person from professional. The agency associated with this type of identity leads one to consider that, indeed, we cannot fix the world but can only choose to live in it differently.

In many ways this leaves me, in a metaphorical sense, naked and vulnerable in my life with students. As Jardine (2000) so aptly described, "Perhaps the greatest and most fearsome is the moment of knowing I am this earthbody and *nothing besides*" (p. 210). There are no preconceived methods that I can use to help students on the path towards humility, but I can live my life by being present in each moment along the way. In a sense I can join my students on this path. It is always nice to have a guide on a journey on which you are expecting some difficulties. As a guide, I have learned that silence is just as important as language. I must choose my words carefully because they are filled with the lives of others—past, present, and future. In an overall sense my role is to help students to interpret various expressions of life that come before them. I must also help them to cope with the feelings of fear and anxiety that accompany their journey. Most important, I must share my own enthusiasm and wonder for a world whose invitation will never be sufficiently answered.

## Enhancing the Noosphere

It is difficult to determine exactly when my interest in the concept of ecological identity began. Perhaps it started with my first memorable experience in nature, which occurred along the shores of Lake Winnipeg. I was nine years old and was sitting on the front seat of a motorboat beside my uncle. We were at the end of a long day, traveling down the Red River, which empties into Lake Winnipeg, and were looking for a place to camp. The sun was settling in the western horizon, and the water on the lake was perfectly calm. As we approached the shoreline I was mesmerized and captivated by what

I saw. The brilliance of the sun's light made the leaves on the wolf willow along the shore glisten in a way that I had never seen before. Not only did I *see* this beauty, but I also *felt* it in a way that was so wonderful I could never forget it.

Perhaps it was this early experience and others like it that compelled me to jump at any opportunity to work in the outdoors later on in my life. As a young man I initially worked with teens in summer camps and guided them on canoe trips. Later I worked in wilderness settings with "troubled" youth and discovered the therapeutic impact of this setting. Later in my career I used the wilderness as a setting in which to engage in emotional work with men. These experiences were always supported by my own sojourns into the more-than-human world. I used these times to relax and reflect upon my own life. I was often joined by friends on these excursions, sometimes I went alone, and now as a father I share these experiences with my family.

I remember my first term as a social work student in 1976. I was inspired by my professor's enthusiasm about the ecological model that was gaining popularity. In many ways it felt as though we were on the verge of something exciting, maybe a breakthrough that would lead to significant social change. Although I was enamored with the ecological perspective, I also felt some discomfort with both the model and the way it was taught. This discomfort revolved around the incongruence I felt between my own experience in the more-than-human world and the way in which this model was presented. It took me some time, but I eventually realized that the ecological model, as it was described in these early years, consistently relocated me to the position of an observer. This was contrary to my experiences in nature, where I felt more like a participant in something greater than myself. I remember the discouragement that I later felt when I realized that the ecological model had become just another assessment tool that left me on the outside, always looking into the lives of the people with whom I worked.

It is within this place of discomfort between my own experience and the theoretical conceptualization of the ecological model that this study emerged. The questions "What does ecological identity mean?" and "What implications does this have for practice?" helped me to explore this discomfort and its nuances in a deeper way. To answer these questions, I initially relied upon a number of voices from the literature that either supported the notion of an ecological identity or were critical of this concept. I then engaged three social workers in conversations to help me to explore the meaning of an ecological identity and the implications for practice. These conversations were filled with events that challenged me to create a dynamic understanding of ecological identity and to gain a wider and deeper view of social work practice.

Boff (1997) suggested that, along with systems of the lithosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere, and anthroposphere, there is also the noosphere, which he described as the "communion of minds and hearts—as a center of life, solidarity and shared growth in love" (p. xii). I believe that this study of ecological identity enhances the noosphere and challenges the prejudices that limit the way we are able to talk about the serious problems that we face today. A study of ecological identity reveals our limited notions of human identity, questions the relationships we have developed with one another, and complicates the notion of human agency. With regard to social work practice, this study has resulted in a definition of the helping relationship as one that is based on great humility and requires a unique sensitivity to the processes associated with life. It has also linked human suffering to a greater "earthly" context that challenges us to consider human suffering as a result of the great schism that has opened between humans and the more-than-human world. In an overall sense, this dissertation enriches the capacity of the noosphere because it makes a direct link between social and ecological problems.

It could be argued that a study of an ecological identity merely represents the manic Western desire to search for a reified, autonomous, definable identity. This is problematic because, as we have seen, the more that this type of false identity emerges, the more separate and alienated we become from the world. In response to this concern, I would like to make two comments. A popular adage in the social work practice discourse is that it is always important to "start where the client is at." This suggests that, although the original starting place for exploration may be fraught with difficulties, it is an appropriate place from which to start because it offers a certain familiarity that provides safety and a language that can initiate the interpretive process. In addition, because this study started with the question of ecological identity, it revealed the contradictory character inherent in Western identity discourse. Rather than engage in a relentless and eventually fruitless pursuit of identity, a study of ecological identity challenges us to relinquish this desire and calls upon us to pay more careful attention to the world around us.

The tenets inherent in the hermeneutic endeavor also make it important to point out that this research is part of a larger dialogue that needs to take place. Although this dissertation has challenged old prejudices and brought forward new ones, it is important to note that they emerged in conversations with social workers. There is no doubt that, whereas there would be some similarities, there would also be many different and perhaps contradictory questions raised if I asked the same questions of those individuals who receive social work services or who experience the poverty and marginalization so rampant in society. I also think that it would be beneficial to engage social work students in a similar dialogue. Because of the early stage of their professional affiliation, they might offer some unique and challenging perspectives. Therefore, this study of ecological identity must be seen as part of a multitude and a diverse set of conversations that are yet to take place.

Because this is a hermeneutic study, I also acknowledge that my subjectivity lives throughout this text. Although, of course, this interpretation has been a creative effort that has been influenced by a myriad of voices, experiences, and interpretations, it also reflects the prejudices of my own horizon of understanding. I presented my interpretation of ecological identity and the implications for practice as an invitation. I have tried to write in a manner that claims my readers and compels them to ask more questions about my research topic. My goal was to keep the question of identity and, more specifically, ecological identity alive within the discourse of social work and social work education. The validity of this exploration comes not only from the rigor in which I have interpreted these conversations, but also from whether I have moved my reader to ask questions that will promote future conversation.

In this context and in the sprit of the hermeneutic imagination, I would like to raise a question that has surfaced as a result of this study. A task always deeply embedded in any hermeneutic endeavor is to determine the question that a particular conversation is trying to answer. As I reflect upon my conversations with Donald, Rena, and Paula, it appears to me that we were trying to explore a deeper, perhaps more difficult question than those I initially posed. In taking into account both conversations with each of the research participants, the following questions emerges for me: "As humans destroy the more-than-human world, do they destroy their capacity to care for others?" In retrospect, the questions I initially asked about ecological identity and its implications for practice reflect an attempt to answer this question. I suggest that the interpretations that I have offered of ecological identity and social work practice make this an important question to explore.

In asking this question, a number of feelings come to the surface; and once again I am reminded of the personal nature of this research project. I have written about a topic about which I care deeply, and I feel grateful for the opportunity to have engaged in this activity. It has been an academic endeavor, but this project has also challenged me emotionally, spiritually, and cognitively. I appreciate the support that I have received to conduct this study and feel indebted to Donald, Rena, and Paula for sharing their time and wisdom with me. Without their generosity, graciousness, and willingness to share their lives with me, this project would not have existed. Not only did my conversations with these three people help me to understand my research topic in more depth, but because of the people they are, I was also able to muster the determination and effort to complete this project. Their concern, interest, enthusiasm, and honesty throughout our discussions inspired me. In part because of these three individuals, I felt that I was doing important work.

Finally, while I worked on this dissertation I was struck by an irony that has permeated this project since its inception. Writing and researching the topic of ecological identity have prevented me from engaging with the organic world that I so deeply love!

This irony surfaced for me as I was writing chapter 5, and as result I visited a wilderness area. The foray to White Rabbit Creek not only reinvigorated me, but also provided an important source of meaning that, in my opinion, enriched my writing. At the beginning of this research project my family and I planted a tree just beside our house. I can see this tree (called a radiant crabapple) from my second-floor office window. It has grown high enough that I can clearly see its branches, and these branches beckon me. I am tired of looking through the window that has for so long denied me the opportunity to explore the tree more closely. It is spring time, the buds are just beginning to bloom, and I can't imagine what they will smell like.

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# APPENDIX:

# LETTER OF EXPLANATION OF THE STUDY AND CONSENT FORM

## Appendix: Letter of Explanation of the Study and Consent Form

Dear ___________,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research project entitled, "Ecological Identity: Implications for Life Practice." I am a PhD candidate at the University of Alberta in the Department of Secondary Education. This research is an essential component of my studies and will assist me in obtaining my degree. The purpose of my study is to explore the concept of ecological identity and to develop a deeper understanding of what role it might play in our day to day work with clients. In this study, I will be conducting conversations with approximately 6 professional social workers that have demonstrated an interest and commitment to this research topic.

If you agree to participate in this research I would like to conduct approximately two, one hour in length conversations with you. We can meet at a location that is convenient for you. Before our conversation begins I will briefly describe the purpose of the study and answer any questions you may have. During our conversation I will digitally record our discussion and subsequently have it transcribed into a print based format. After our conversation I will review these print base materials and determine what areas or questions need further discussion. I will then contact you to establish a time for our second conversation. The time between our first and second conversation will be approximately two to four weeks.

Throughout this research endeavor your confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained. The individual transcribing the recording of our conversations is a certified transcriber who will be required to sign a University of Alberta confidentiality form. Your name on any printed documents representing our conversation will also be substituted with a fictitious name. In my dissertation there will be no specific personal or professional information that will link you to this study. University of Alberta research standards does require me to store the information from our conversations (both digital and print based) in a secure location for a minimum of five years.

It is important to note that at any time you have the right to terminate your participation in this study. If you decide to do so any digital recording or print based evidence of our conversations will be destroyed. Your decision to opt out of the study will in no way lead to any prejudice, negative consequence, or loss of pre-existing entitlements.

The primary use of the research materials obtained from this study will be used to complete my dissertation. However, I may use my research "findings" in professional workshop presentations and subsequent journal articles. In both these circumstances no information will be provide that would identify you as a research participant.

I hope you are interested in working with me to more fully understand this exciting research topic. If you have any further questions about this study or your potential role please contact me at 1-780-497-5563 or vogelsp@macewan.ca. You may also contact my advisor Dr. Terry Carson at terry.carson@ualberta.ca. or 492-3674.

Once again, thank you for your interest in participating in this research.

Sincerely,

Peter Vogels (PhD candidate, Department of Secondary Education)

## Consent Form

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research project entitled, "Ecological Identity: Implications for Life Practice." Once you have read the accompanying letter and are in agreement with its contents please sign this form.

Consent to Participate: ______________________________

Ph.: ______________________________

Email address: ______________________________

If you have any questions, complaints or concerns related to the consequences of your involvement with this research please contact:

Dr. Terry Carson (Dissertation Advisor) at: 1-780-

Or

Dr. Max van Manen (Department of Secondary Education Ethics Advisor) at 1-780-

Thank you for your interest in this project.

Peter Vogels (PhD candidate, Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta)

**This study has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Faculties of Education and Extension at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participants' rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at (780) 492-3751.**